MAKING SENSE OF Mind Only

WHY YOGĀCĀRA BUDDHISM MATTERS

William S. Waldron

Advance Praise for

Making Sense of Mind Only

"This book is a treasure, a major contribution both to scholars of Buddhist studies and to students of Buddhism who care about doctrine. Professor Waldron explains in lucid prose the historical and doctrinal context of Yogācāra as well as its philosophical importance and value for the contemporary philosophy of mind. His account is accurate, rigorous, and profound; the narrative is compelling. You will love this book, and you will learn from it."
—Jay L. Garfield, Doris Silbert Professor in the Humanities and professor of philosophy and Buddhist studies, Smith College and the Harvard Divinity School

"This is the book on Yogācāra we've long awaited. Drawing on a lifetime of study of one of the world's most complex psychological and metaphysical systems, and writing with extraordinary lucidity, William Waldron sets the 'mind-only,' or cognitivist, school of Mahāyāna Buddhism firmly within the cultural and philosophical context of Buddhist thought as a whole, showing that its great masters were not—*contra* their critics—subjective idealists or absolutist outliers. Rather, they were key contributors to the grand project of thinking through the implications of the cardinal Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising, who in doing so shaped a theory of the structure and functions of consciousness as subtle and sophisticated as any ever proposed. *Making Sense of Mind Only* is distinctive for Waldron's ability not only to dig deeply into original Yogācāra sources but to bring the tradition alive through relating it both to contemporary cognitive science and philosophy and to our own experience of everyday life. This is not only a great book on Yogācāra but a great book on Buddhist thought and what it tells us about that most basic, vital, and elusive aspect of being human: the mind."
—Roger R. Jackson, John W. Nason Professor of Asian Studies and Religion, emeritus, Carleton College

"With incisive exposition of key sources and drawing on cognitive science, Waldron has crafted a new kind of introduction to Buddhist philosophy from the Indian Yogācāra perspective. Importantly, the work clearly demonstrates how Yogācāra carries forward the philosophical projects of mainstream Abhidharma and Madhyamaka. *Making Sense of Mind Only* is a brilliant book."
—Jonathan C. Gold, professor of religion, Princeton University, and author of *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*

"William Waldron shows how Yogācāra can be read as presenting a picture of the world, the mind, and the relation between the two that is philosophically sophisticated, scientifically informed, and able to move beyond the simplistic opposition between realism and idealism, where everything is either 'out there' or 'in here.' I strongly recommend *Making Sense of Mind Only* to all philosophically interested readers who want to find out what early Indian Yogācāra has to say on some of the most fundamental questions about reality and our cognitive access to it."
—Jan Westerhoff, University of Oxford

"William Waldron's book is a definitive explanation of Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy. Written by the leading authority in the field today, this book brilliantly interprets Yogācāra, historically and holistically, as in the first instance a philosophy of mind, addressing the central question, 'Under what conditions do our cognitive processes construct illusory worlds, and how can we learn to see through the illusions so constructed?' Written in an elegant and accessible prose, *Making Sense of Mind Only: Why Yogācāra Buddhism Matters* will shape philosophical discussion about Yogācāra for years to come."
—Jonardon Ganeri, Bimal Matilal Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, University of Toronto

"In *Making Sense of Mind Only*, William Waldron presents a precise account of nonconceptual wisdom—coming through the Indian Mahāyāna masters Asaṅga and Vasubandhu—that is invaluable for developing nondual practices in everyday life. He helps us discern the value of Yogācāra

philosophy at this time when cognitive science, developmental psychology, and aspects of physics are becoming aligned with it. Waldron engages both general and scholarly readers, breaking through our habits of being trapped in the subject–object split. I cannot recommend this seminal contribution to contemporary psychology and spirituality too highly."
—Polly Young-Eisendrath, PhD, Jungian analyst and psychologist, author of *The Present Heart*

"This introduction to Yogācāra thought is a remarkable accomplishment: drawing on his decades of work with Yogācāra sources, Waldron manages to make Yogācāra accessible to those unfamiliar with Buddhist scholastic philosophy while still doing justice to its intellectual, historical, and textual complexities. Waldron's vivid demonstration of the philosophical subtlety and sophistication of the tradition—both on its own terms and when placed in conversation with contemporary philosophy—is a strong argument for the continued relevance of the medieval Buddhist philosophical tradition."
—Robert Sharf, chair, Numata Center for Buddhist Studies, University of California, Berkeley

"*Making Sense of Mind Only* clarifies how our perceptions are largely driven by unconscious apprehensions that bind us to ideological stances and their ensuing delusions. Outlining a path through our minds' fabrications, Waldron offers readers access to one of the world's deepest traditions of working with the mind."
—John P. Keenan, professor emeritus of religion, Middlebury College

"*Making Sense of Mind Only* is a must-read for anyone looking for a clearly written and coherent overview of Yogācāra philosophy. In his nuanced presentation, Waldron shows how most of the main themes of Yogācāra are conceptual developments of early Buddhist thought, demonstrating links between the origins of Buddhism and the most influential Yogācāra philosophers, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu."
—John Powers, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne

"*Making Sense of Mind Only* is the introduction to Yogācāra Buddhism that I have been waiting for, but it is more than an overview: it squarely addresses the common misconception that Yogācāra is a philosophical idealism. By explaining what Yogācāra actually teaches, Waldron reveals how essential it is to the Buddhist tradition and what we all can learn from it."
—David Loy, author of *Nonduality: In Buddhism and Beyond*

"This book is the most thorough and accessible account to date of the key texts and concepts of Yogācāra Buddhism, showing it to be a necessary and coherent system of ideas and practices."
—Jan Willis, professor emerita of religious studies, Wesleyan University, and author of *On Knowing Reality*

"Professor Waldron is acknowledged as one of the world's leading experts on Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy and psychology. It is the Yogācāra school that worked out the main Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist models of cognitive construction and reification, contemplative and behavioral trainings to deconstruct such patterns, and consequent possibilities for psychological, ethical, and spiritual transformation. Professor Waldron's decades of experience researching and teaching Yogācāra philosophy in dialogue with modern disciplines and sciences have given him the skills needed to write a foundational introduction to Yogācāra that demonstrates the enormous contribution it is now making across many current frames of knowledge."
—John Makransky, associate professor of Buddhism and comparative theology, Boston College

"William Waldron's remarkable book brings his notable textual scholarship into accessible conversation with meditators, scientists, and consciousness aficionados. Steering between idealism and realism, Waldron allows us to ask, "What is all this and how do we know?" His care in demonstrating Yogacara's nuanced and elegant answers invites us to fall in love with Mahāyāna Buddhism in a brand-new way."
—Judith Simmer-Brown, distinguished professor, Naropa University, and author of *Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*

"Many tomes on Yogācāra examine this infamously complex tradition by analysis of one text or figure. *Making Sense of Mind Only* brings it all back home, showing how Yogācāra organically builds upon the Indian Buddhist themes that come before it while focusing on the role of consciousness. Waldron's background in modern cognitive theory allows him to address and explain issues in terms familiar to a broad audience. This book should stimulate a wide-ranging discussion on cognitive theory beyond Buddhist studies."
—Paul L. Swanson, Permanent Research Fellow, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, and author of *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*

"*Making Sense of Mind Only* is a sympathetic reading of Yogācāra that skillfully weaves this complex school of thought into conversation with contemporary philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science. It pays careful attention both to the tradition's historical context and to its broader implications about human cognition. The interpretation of Yogācāra as cognitivist rather than idealist is convincing and relevant."
—David McMahan, Charles A. Dana Professor of Religious Studies, Franklin & Marshall College

"Rightly reframing Yogācāra in terms of patterns of interaction and overlapping feedback loops, Waldron's noble book may be viewed as a lucid exposition of the monk Assaji's famous statement to his fellow disciple Sāriputta: 'Of those things that arise from a cause, the Buddha has declared their cause as well as their cessation.' And along the way, he offers insightful perspectives on some of the most seminal texts of classical Yogācāra."
—Mario D'Amato, author of *Maitreya's Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes*

"*Making Sense of Mind Only* is an essential resource for anyone interested in the study of Buddhism, especially Mahāyāna philosophy. Its clear and concise presentation makes it a valuable book for scholars and practitioners alike. Bill Waldron's extensive knowledge and expertise make the intricacies of the Mind Only school accessible to a broader audience, allowing readers to explore the subtleties and relevance of Mind Only thought in our

contemporary lives. This book is sure to be a must-read for years to come for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Buddhist thought."
—Eyal Aviv, associate professor of religion and philosophy, George Washington University

"In *Making Sense of Mind Only*, William Waldron fully engages us with the core factors in the argument for 'mind only': perception (*vijñapti*) and dependent arising. These form our conscious experience and bring us either further into suffering or out of it, depending on how we deal with them. Waldron shows how through the course of early Buddhism, Abhidharma, early Mahāyāna, and Madhyamaka, Buddhists gradually developed the notions of no-self, karma, and dependent arising, with these receiving their fullest expression in the 'unconscious' region of thought posited by the Yogācāras—the *ālayavijñāna*. The book fleshes out the core components of conscious and unconscious experience through a careful reading of essential texts. The discussion is enhanced by the fact that the author is steeped in the findings of modern psychologists, philosophers, and cognitive scientists, whose recent understandings of the function of consciousness are remarkably similar to those of fifth-century Indian Buddhists. This is superb work."
—A. Charles Muller, professor emeritus, University of Tokyo

Making Sense of Mind Only

Why Yogācāra Buddhism Matters

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Preface

As a teen, I became keenly aware that we are mostly unaware of the motivations driving our actions, that we are not very "in touch with ourselves." This lack of self-knowledge affects many areas of our lives—personal, interpersonal, social, political. Ever since then I have been drawn to multiple ways one might come to recognize and overcome such blind spots.

As I came to learn more about Buddhism both at the feet of teachers in Asia and in the classrooms of America—on the cushion and in the library, so to speak—I felt drawn to classical Indian Yogācāra, especially the teachings of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. My PhD thesis and later publication, *The Buddhist Unconscious: Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought*, examined the Yogācāra concept of a storehouse consciousness—a set of nonconscious cognitive structures and processes—by tracing its origins and development up to the fifth century and examining its systematization in classical texts. Both conscious and unconscious cognitive processes are analyzed there in terms of the early Buddhist idea of dependent arising—discerning the *patterns of interaction* among our sense faculties, environment, and awareness—a deep understanding of which is said to liberate us from our afflictions and obscurations.

Throughout this time, I also followed developments in the cognitive sciences, particularly those that examine how our perception of objects is shaped and formed—whether we realize it or not—by the very cognitive processes through which we perceive them. This *constructivist* approach struck me as remarkably similar to the analyses I found in classical Yogācāra texts.

But this raised some serious questions.

Later Indian Buddhists came to interpret Yogācāra as a form of idealism, the idea that the objects we perceive, including the external world, are "produced" by mind alone, so that "mind" and only mind "truly exists."

That interpretation always seemed strangely disconnected from the constructivist perspective of the storehouse consciousness, and indeed from the interactive analyses of dependent arising at the very center of Yogācāra's three-nature theory—the dependent nature. It takes the cognitive analyses Yogācārins developed to liberate our minds and turns them into philosophical "tenets" about the nature of reality—now "Mind Only." Nor does that view make the best sense of classical Yogācāra texts, if they too are read in their own context. The Mind Only interpretation thus seemed problematic from historical, doctrinal, and textual points of view.

It became obvious to me, as it did to similar-minded colleagues, that a serious re-interpretation—or better, a *reframing*—of classical Yogācāra was in order. We can make better sense of Yogācāra, I suggest, if we use dependent arising as an interpretative rubric, take its historical context and constructivist approach into account, while acknowledging liberation as its ultimate aim.

Given the prestige of the "received tradition," however, one cannot simply claim this—it must be demonstrated. We therefore first survey earlier Buddhist teachings on the dependent arising of our cognitive processes and their constructed objects, and then focus on a small set of representative Yogācāra texts that repeatedly illustrate the integral relations among their constructivist theories, their analyses of apparent objects, and the practices that help us see through such appearances on the path to liberation. These are the patterns of interaction—the dependent arising—of Indian Yogācāra Buddhism.

It seems equally obvious that for much too long we have overlooked the profound insights into our common human condition that Indian Yogācārins articulated centuries ago: we suffer when we ignore the roles each of us plays, individually and collectively, in constructing our human realities. And we benefit by taking their trenchant analyses of this engrained ignorance, and the remedies they forged to transform it, and applying them to our own circumstances.

To date, most of the studies that follow this interpretation of Yogācāra—for I am not alone here—have either been narrowly focused on specific Yogācāra texts or assumed too much background knowledge for a larger reading audience. There is still no accessible introduction to classical Yogācāra in English that examines their teachings within their own histori-

cal context while also seriously engaging their cognitive theories in relation to our shared human condition. These are the gaps this book seeks to fill.

Accordingly, this is neither a text-critical nor a state-of-the-field study of Indian Yogācāra, one that analyzes all available texts and synthesizes all scholarly studies; nor is it a philosophical treatise rehashing the classical debates between idealism and realism; nor is it a historical account of how Yogācāra came to be construed as idealism in later Indian Buddhism. I leave those daunting but admirable tasks to others, writing for different audiences. My modest aim is to provide an accessible entrée to these remarkable teachings—albeit from a distinct vantage point—so that readers may better appreciate the aim and import of their profound insights into the human condition and its possibilities.

Acknowledgments

One accumulates over a long life more debts than can be fully expressed. I am grateful to my many mentors, beginning with my mother, a public grade-school teacher in Detroit, and my father, a lawyer and state legislator; to my rabbi from the far north, Robert Zimmerman, and soul-sojourner from the south, John Coltrane; and to all the great blues and jazz musicians, shamans and healers of the soul; to my preceptors in depth psychology, Freud, Jung, and the Frankfurt School; to the good folks who provided shelter from the storm on the highways and byways from Detroit to Kathmandu, from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to India's Uttar Pradesh; to members of the Tibetan diaspora and my first Buddhist teachers, Geshe Wangchen and Geshe Sopa; to my Japanese Buddhist teachers, Professor Minoru Kiyota of UW-Madison, and from Ōtani University, Kyōto, professors Shin'ya Yasutomi and, especially, Seiki Miyashita, who introduced me to the rigors of Buddhist textual study; to my colleagues at Middlebury College: Larry Yarbrough, an unsurpassed textualist of the Bible; Elizabeth Morrison, a Chan specialist and inspiring co-teacher; and above all John Keenan, whose unparalleled knowledge, leavened with Irish irreverence, still inspires; to the community of Buddhist scholars haunting the faceless halls of AAR conferences across the decades, without which we would all be impoverished in more ways than we know; to my partners in crime Eyal Aviv, Jonathan Gold, Karin Meyers, Chuck Muller, and Dan Lusthaus; to

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Finally, I am grateful for the excellent early work of my good friend and editor David Patt, for the cool and exacting advice of David Kittelstrom and painstaking copyediting of Brent Kite, both of Wisdom Publications. This could not have begun without an NEH Grant (#FB-57064-13) nor persisted without a timely semester leave from Middlebury College way back when. And it might never have ended without the ongoing presence of Pasang Lhamo.

Despite so much good guidance, I apologize for whatever shortcomings, whether acts of omission or commission, remain.

Abbreviations

AN — *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. Cited by nipāta and sutta numbers. For PTS edition, see Morris, Hardy, and Hunt 1885–1910. Translated in Bodhi 2012 and in Woodward and Hare 1932–36. Translations are Bhikkhu Bodhi's unless otherwise specified, modified for terminological consistency.

AKBh — Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* and *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, cited by chapter and verse. For Sanskrit edition and Yaśomitra's commentary, see Shastri 1981. For translation, see La Vallée Poussin 1971 (French) and Pruden 1988–90 (English).

"Ālaya Treatise" — A section of the *Yogācārabhūmi-Viniścayasaṃgrahaṇī* comprised of the "Proof Portion" and the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion."

"Proof Portion." This is in substantial agreement with corresponding passages in Yaśomitra's *Abhidharmasamuccaya-bhāṣya*, for which see the edition in Tatia 1976.

Xuanzang's Chinese: T 1606.31.701b4–702a5.

Tibetan: P 5554, *shi* 12a2–13b5; D 4053, *li* 9b7–11a5.

"*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion"

Xuanzang's Chinese: T 1579.30.579c23–582a28.

Tibetan: P 5539, *zi* 4a5–11a8; D 4038, *zhi* 3b4–9b3.

BTG — Buddhavacana Translation Group 2020, a translation of the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* cited by chapter and section numbers.

D — Dergé (Sde dge) edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka, cited by the catalog numbers from *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons* (Sendai, Japan: Tohoku Imperial University, 1934) with original volume syllables and folio numbers.

DDV — *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* attributed to Maitreya (D 4023), with the *Vṛtti* by Vasubandhu (D 4028). We draw upon these sources:

1. The Tibetan translation of the root text of Maitreya and Vasubandhu's commentary: *Chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa'i 'grel pa khag gsum bzhugs so*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Drigung Kagyud Rinchen Palri Institute, 2013. Abbreviated as Dri.
2. Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013. Abbreviated as Dhc.
3. Brunnhölzl 2012.
4. Scott 2004.
5. Cha 1996.

Dhc — Translation of DDV with Mipham's commentary. See Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013.

DN — *Dīgha-nikāya*. Cited by volume and page number of PTS Pāli edition edited by T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (1890–1911). Translated in Walshe 1995.

Dri — Drigung edition of DDV. See DDV 1.

MMK — *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*) of Nāgārjuna, cited by chapter and verse. For English translations, see Garfield 1995 and Siderits and Katsura 2013.

MN — *Majjhima-nikāya*, cited by sutta and section numbers. Translated in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995 and in Horner 1954–59. Translations are from Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi unless otherwise specified, modified for terminological consistency.

MSg — Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna* (*Mahāyānasaṃgraha*). Cited by chapter numbers and section. Chinese: T 1594. Tibetan: P 5549 and D 4048. English translation in Brunnhölzl 2018 and Waldron 2003.

MVBh — *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu. Cited by chapter and verse of the root text. Edition by G. Nagao (Tōkyō: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1964). See also D'Amato 2012.

P — Peking edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka, cited by catalog number of the edition reproduced under the supervision of D. T. Suzuki et al., Ōtani University, Kyoto (Tokyo/Kyoto: Tibetan Tripitaka Research Institute, 1955–61), along with original volume syllable and folio number.

PED — *Pali–English Dictionary*. See Rhys-Davids and Stede 1979.

PTS — Pali Text Society.

SN — *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, cited by saṃyutta and sutta number. Edition edited by Léon Feer, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–98). English translations in Bodhi 2000 and Rhys-Davids and Woodward 1917–30. Translations are Bhikkhu Bodhi's unless otherwise specified, modified for terminological consistency.

SED — *Sanskrit–English Dictionary*. See Monier-Williams 1986.

T — Taishō Shinshu Daizōkyo edition of the Chinese Tripiṭaka, edited by J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe (Tokyo, 1926–38), cited by catalog, volume, and page number.

Tib. — Tibetan.

Viṃśatikā — *Twenty Verses* of Vasubandhu, cited by verse number. For Sanskrit edition, see Lévi 1925. Chinese translation by Xuanzang: T 1590. Tibetan: D 4057. English translations in Cook 2006, Dunne n.d., and Gold et al. n.d.

Prologue

I HAVE ALWAYS FELT as if there were spirits in the woods: spirits of animals, of birds, and especially of the native peoples who were here long before the Europeans—which in my neck of the woods in northern Michigan are the Chippewa peoples, also known as Ojibwe. As a boy I would often go for a hike and let my mind and body relax into the woods, the crows cawing, the squirrels rustling in the leaves, the water softly gurgling. Stopping to listen and feel, still, sitting under a tree. At times like these it almost sounds as if someone or something were there, moving, hovering in the swaying branches.

This is both an engaging exercise and a deep metaphor. If we allow the idea that these *could* be spirits, and not just another person or animal, then we listen more attentively. At times we can't tell if there is really something out there or if it's just our imagination "playing tricks when we are trying to be so quiet" (as Bob Dylan puts it). If we sit in this ambiguity for a while, not knowing if the presence we sense is out there or in here—if we sit in this not-knowing and not having to know—then we may develop an acute sensitivity, even vulnerability, to the interplay between our internal experiences and external stimuli. And the boundaries between them begin to weaken and blur.

This allows us to open ourselves up to deeper, more subtle ways of knowing, which helps us to approach the themes and contents of this book. Buddhist inquiry begins by looking long and deeply at human experience—emotional, perceptual, and conceptual experience. It recognizes how easily our attention shifts, in mere moments, from our immediate sensations and feelings to more abstract conceptions and ideas. We easily get lost in these abstractions, imagining they are fully real, perhaps even the most real. But we can also learn to see through these constructive processes by skillfully

focusing on our immediate experiences and noting our tendency to reify—to "thing-ify"—these experiences into thoughts and concepts. Getting caught up in these abstractions, and being able to see through them, are both universal tendencies and universal possibilities. And they both have a history.

Depending on how you look at it, we have all had this cognitive fall from grace, which began either around the third year of childhood (Bloom 2005), accompanying the development of language; or on the sixth day of Creation in the Garden of Eden (Adam naming all the animals); or in the middle of the first millennium BCE, the Axial Age, with the development of highly sophisticated philosophies and religions in ancient Greece, Israel, Persia, India, and China.

This latter date, historians suggest, was around when our sense of subjectivity, of being someone *in here* experiencing the world *out there*, became verbally and conceptually articulated, expressing a shift, at least among the literate classes, from a more embodied and socially embedded identity into a highly reified, abstract entity—an *unchanging self*. This development of an internal, abstracted sense of self was coupled with an increasing objectification of the external world—where objects appear to exist in and of themselves, thus becoming more open to manipulation and exploitation (Havelock 1983). These developments led to increasing levels of internal and external control and technical mastery, but at the same time they created confusion about the relationship between our sensorial processes on the one hand and abstract, reified concepts like *self* and *objects* on the other. This confusion entails a series of problems.

First, if we really think we are *unchanging*, then how do we explain our changing experiences and the relation between our actions and their consequences? Both actions and their results occur in time: they start, continue for a while, and then stop. Unchanging entities *by definition* do not do that—they don't change. And insofar as we aspire to grow, mature, and improve, this idea of an unchanging self ends up obscuring and obstructing our ability to make intentional, positive changes in our lives. The Buddhists would come to call this an *ideational* or *cognitive obscuration*.

We also know that things are constantly changing, including our experiences and sense of who we are, and at some intuitive level we sense that something about this idea of *self* is not quite right. For such an abstract and

reified sense of self to remain plausible in the face of our embodied, transient lives, it needs to be continually reconstructed and reinforced both conceptually and emotionally and thus becomes a constant source of stress and anxiety. Attachment to things that are constructed and constantly changing evokes a range of emotional disturbances that Buddhists call *affective obscurations*—because they obscure the dynamic, constructed nature of who we are.

These obscurations account for much of the power our perceptions and projections hold over us, though we often don't notice it. We readily imagine that the rustling in the leaves means that there really is a bear out there, or that the people and objects we encounter in life really do possess the properties we imagine they do. Instead of recognizing that our perception of such "objects" is inextricably tied to our own emotional valences, our own presuppositions and projections, we imagine they exist truly and wholly separate from us. Our perceptions—and all we project upon them—take on an independence of their own, one that we readily reify, objectify, and appropriate. These, too, are some of the consequences of the two obscurations, the cognitive and affective, that arise from and reinforce the split between reified subjects and objectified entities.

This sense of separation from the world, of being a subject sitting "in here" looking at objects "out there," is what philosopher Daniel Dennett dubs the Cartesian Theater. Yogācāra Buddhists call it the *subject-object duality*. This sense of separation prevents us from appreciating our embodied existence, inspires endless anxiety about our identities, and exacerbates all kinds of internal and external conflicts. In the Yogācāra view, it is the *core cognitive fault* that keeps us bound to destructive and self-defeating behavioral patterns.

But we can overcome all this. As we saw in our walks in the woods, there are ways to calm down and look deeply, ways to attend to a level of embodied experience that sidesteps our tendency to reify our sense of self and the subject-object duality that flows from it. Buddhist traditions developed these methods over many centuries: calming (*śamatha*) helps pacify our thoughts and feelings so that we can look deeply (*vipaśyanā*), analyze our reifying tendencies, and attenuate our attachment to reified subjects and objects—all with the ultimate aim of freeing ourselves from, to quote Dylan again, "false ideas, images, and distorted facts." And this enables us

to reengage the world, having transformed our sense of separateness into an unending compassion for all living beings. Such is the Yogācāra vision presented here.

Introduction

THE YOGĀCĀRA SCHOOL—the Yoga Practice school—is one of two main schools of classical Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. It developed between the second and fifth centuries of the Common Era, some eight hundred years after the time of the Buddha, and its teachings were highly influential in later forms of Buddhism in India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. It was an encyclopedic tradition that collected and systematized the broad range of Buddhist teachings up to its own time, such as the three buddha bodies, the bodhisattva path to awakening, and the signature concepts we will be focusing on: the three natures (*trisvabhāva*), the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), and mere perception (*vijñaptimātra*). Its strong emphasis on how our minds operate lent it to also being called the Consciousness school (*vijñānavāda*) or the Mind Only (*cittamātra*) tradition. Its core cognitive concepts—storehouse consciousness and mere perception—have, however, been interpreted mostly from perspectives developed centuries after their originating contexts. This "received tradition" has interpreted Yogācāra as teaching that "only mind" exists and that external objects do not, a position known in Western philosophy as *idealism*.

The present examination of Yogācāra teachings, based on contemporaneous texts interpreted in terms of their own historical milieu, does not support that interpretation. It interprets Yogācāra in light of the Indian Buddhism that preceded it, especially in terms of the dependent arising of our cognitive and affective processes. It first aims to place Yogācāra within its broader historical context, as following and building upon the insights and practices of early Buddhism (beginning in the fifth century BCE) and of early Mahāyāna Buddhism (beginning in the first century CE), especially as seen in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. It aims for fidelity not just to

the historical record but also to the complex textual traditions that developed within these first thousand years or so of Indian Buddhism. Indeed, its core Yogācāra chapters are focused on specific Yogācāra texts and teachings.

Having located Yogācāra within this historical context, we then pivot to a more holistic approach in which we bring out the broader coherence of Yogācāra Buddhism, thereby recuperating insights and perspectives that remain relevant today. We do this by treating classical Yogācāra ideas and practices—from roughly the third to the fifth century—in *relation to each other* and to the larger path of liberation. We focus especially on the ways that Yogācārins gradually built upon earlier theories that analyzed how false appearances—reified subjects and objects—arise, while noting parallels with the findings of contemporary cognitive science. And we forefront their insight into how our cognitive processes collectively and continuously construct our social and cultural worlds and the ways we may come to see through such illusions.

This approach does present some challenges. To follow the Yogācāra teachings and appreciate their logical and psychological analyses, the reader will need to pick up the basic terminology and modes of thinking that Indian Buddhists used to analyze experience. The reader must learn, in short, to think "Buddhistically"—and this takes practice. This is one of the tasks of the pre-Yogācāra chapters: to set the stage for a deeper appreciation of the Mahāyāna teachings of Indian Yogācāra Buddhism.

Since this work is addressed to a broad but attentive audience, it does not assume extensive knowledge of Indian Buddhism. It therefore begins by outlining the broader historical context, drawing upon the presentations in early Buddhist literature of such basic doctrines as karma, saṃsāra, and nirvāṇa, the four noble truths, the five aggregates, no-self, and, most importantly, *dependent arising*—the observation that phenomena arise in dependence upon other phenomena. This perspective is more counterintuitive than it seems. To help make this ancient way of understanding our lives intelligible and thought-provoking, if not compelling, we therefore marshal examples and illustrations from everyday experience and modern cognitive science.

This focus on dependent arising fulfills a second task of these early chapters: It lays the groundwork for showing how closely Yogācāra cognitive theories build upon analyses found in earlier stages of Buddhism—indeed,

they mostly use *the same terms and modes of analysis.* We could, in fact, see most of Indian Buddhist thought as gradually drawing out this profound insight: that phenomena come about and persist in dependence on other phenomena.

Thus contextualized, the Mahāyāna and Yogācāra chapters aim to guide readers through such basic but abstruse Mahāyāna Buddhist concepts as thusness, emptiness, the two truths, and the specifically Yogācāra teachings of the three turnings, the three natures, the storehouse consciousness, and mere perception. These too will be illustrated by parallels drawn from psychology and cognitive science to highlight the continuing relevance of Yogācāra today. From this perspective, such cognitive theories as the storehouse consciousness and mere perception are better interpreted in terms of the dependent arising of our innate cognitive processes and critiques of reification, respectively, than as formulating a radically new ontology—that mind, and mind only, "truly exists." We thus make first a historical argument and then, based on that, an interpretive one.

Questions

Within this historical contextualization, we will be emphasizing broader conceptual synthesis over detailed historical analysis. At bottom, we are trying to make sense of the basic themes of classical Yogācāra as if they were a coherent body of ideas and practices. Thus we are asking broader questions, and over a longer time scale, than if we were investigating the inception and development of specific Yogācāra doctrines within its first few centuries by cross-referencing Yogācāra texts and reconstructing their relative chronologies.[1] As important and useful as that endeavor is, it entails a different set of questions and methods.

We are first asking a broad historical question: How do Yogācāra's ideas relate to those of its predecessors? To what degree is Yogācāra a radical departure—or not—from earlier or other forms of Indian Buddhism?

But we are also asking interpretive questions: How does classical Yogācāra hang together? That is, how do the three turnings, the three natures, the storehouse consciousness, and the notion of mere perception form a

1. Schmithausen 2014 and Buescher 2008.

coherent set of ideas and practices? And crucially, what role do these concepts play on the Buddhist path? In short, what is it all for? In this respect, we are looking for connections where others might see disjunctions, for continuity where others would find discontinuity, and for thematic focus where others would emphasize disparate detail.

I appreciate that these two aims—the historical and holistic—are somewhat at odds with each other. I am well aware of the arguments against the reality of entities and essences, not to mention such complex phenomena as historical "traditions," and take such analyses seriously. But I am also aware—*a là* one of the Yogācāra texts we will be examining, the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra,* the *Sūtra Explicating the Buddha's Implicit Intent*—of the dangers of a one-sided deconstruction, of letting our analytic enthusiasms preclude a more integrated view of this tradition, even one that is—as they all are—in constant flux. I therefore seek a middle way between the Scylla of detailed historical deconstruction and the Charybdis of positing a thoroughly ahistorical Yogācāra "school." So in tandem with historically contextualizing the stated concerns and specific contents of key Yogācāra teachings, I am also assuming that Vasubandhu or Asaṅga (circa fourth and fifth centuries)—the two classical Yogācāra authors whose works we will examine most closely—saw a crucial relation between the philosophical and psychological analyses found in the early sections of their compositions, the practices of meditation relying on those analyses in the middle sections, and the fruits of the path that follow from that, presented at the ends of their treatises.

This, then, is our basic interpretive aim: to understand how Yogācāra interpretations of earlier scriptures, and their cognitive theories and critical concepts, were used to explain our bondage and facilitate our liberation, as their authors consistently claimed they were. The argument is that this integrated approach provides more valuable insights into these complex concepts than if they were interpreted independently of each other and in isolation from their historical context and therapeutic intent. This is also where and how our interpretation of Yogācāra departs from the way it has been presented over many centuries of South Asian Buddhist studies.[2]

2. There are notable exceptions to this, such as Shākya Chokden and Mipham in the Tibetan tradition (Komarovski 2011, Duckworth 2009 and 2011) and, among modern scholars, D'Amato (2012), Gold (2015a, 2015b, and 2015c), Kochumuttom (1982), and Lusthaus (2002).

Methods

The characterization of Yogācāra as a form of philosophical idealism did not begin in Western academia. Yogācāra doctrines came to be considered a form of idealism, in which only mind was thought to truly and substantially "exist," within a few centuries of its inception. This view grew out of developments associated with the epistemological school of Dignāga (ca. 480–540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (late sixth century), as well as the critical and sectarian perspectives of the newly coined Madhyamaka school, following the teachings of Buddhapālita (ca. 470–550) and, somewhat later, Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650). The view that Yogācārins taught a kind of idealism eventually became enshrined in traditional doxographies, the *siddhānta* literature, that sought to map out the ever-expanding terrain of Buddhist doctrines. These were the perspectives that most schools of Tibetan Buddhism eventually adapted and developed. In short, the "received tradition" that treats classical Yogācāra as a form of idealism reflects the perspectives and priorities of commentators writing centuries after its origins, based on different theoretical frameworks and asking different kinds of questions.

Simply put, this later view is marked by a subtle but significant shift away from classical early Buddhist questions couched in causal and cognitive terms, "Under what conditions do illusions occur, and how can we learn to see through them?"—which reflect the perspective and syntax of dependent arising—and toward more ontological and epistemological questions, asking, "What exists, and how do we know?" In this way, Yogācāra statements came to be interpreted not as answering "How do illusions occur?" but as answering "What things exist?" And the answer ascribed to Yogācāra became "Objects don't exist; only mind does."

This is an oversimplification, no doubt; history is always more complex, and plenty of Yogācāra texts discuss what does or does not exist. But it well expresses the historical and cognitive orientation of this study. We are looking at classical Yogācāra, roughly the works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, prospectively rather than retrospectively. That is, we are seeking to understand how they built upon earlier teachings within their own historical context, rather than considering how Yogācāra teachings were interpreted and reworked by later traditions. We are approaching their works, in short, as if questions framed in terms of dependent arising were closer to their central

concerns and modes of expression, and then *seeing what their teachings look like from that perspective*. In other words, we are looking at Yogācāra as a form of *vijñānavāda*—in effect, "cognitivism." This *cognitive* approach is arguably more consonant with their own orientation than the epistemological or ontological approaches developed much later—a topic we will return to below.

Admittedly, these later Indian and Tibetan Buddhists were in a very different position than we are today. With limited historical knowledge at their disposal, they sought ways to organize the bewildering array of Buddhist ideas and practices that had arisen over many centuries of Buddhism in India—a project exacerbated for the Tibetans by their assumption that all the Buddhist sūtras, not to mention tantras, were the actual teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha, taught during his own lifetime. This induced them to devise nonhistorical criteria for assessing the relative value of these teachings.[3]

Most of them, at least at the doctrinal level, chose the Madhyamaka interpretations of emptiness—the insight that since all phenomena are dependently arisen, they lack any essential nature or characteristic of their own—as the "highest" Buddhist teaching and hierarchically ranked the other "schools" according to their claimed consistency with emptiness, based on the premise that emptiness most closely expresses, or most directly leads to, the highest level of realization.[4] This arrangement provided later Indian and Tibetan Buddhists with a clear criterion for the progressive study and practice of very diverse materials, one that remains vital to Tibetan Buddhists to this day. But it has also had the unfortunate effect not only of obscuring the historical context, and thereby altering our understanding of the content, of earlier Buddhist traditions, but also of discouraging deeper

3. See Gold 2015a, 94–127, Cabezon 1992, and Skilling 2000 on Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti* regarding these issues.

4. A project, ironically, first clearly articulated by Vasubandhu himself. Some Chinese Buddhist traditions, by contrast, choose one Mahāyāna sūtra or another as the standard by which other teachings could be organized, the so-called *panjiao* system. *Panjiao* is a "term denoting the systems developed within Chinese Buddhism, primarily by the T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen schools, for taking the often confusing and contradictory mass of Buddhist teachings and scriptures and classifying them into a hierarchical structure using principles of organization. These principles could include the period in the Buddha's life during which he gave a particular teaching, or judgements about the extent to which a given school or doctrine presented the truth straightforwardly or adapted it for audiences of lower abilities" (Keown 2003, 210).

studies of Yogācāra teachings in their own right. This is the lacuna we aim to address.

Historical Perspectives

We, on the other hand, have much a broader historical perspective. We have knowledge (albeit partial and uneven) of the entire range of Buddhist traditions from the time of the Buddha to the present, from Bodhgaya to Burma to Berkeley. This provides us with additional perspectives from which to approach these diverse traditions. This allows, indeed demands, that we look at them in a new light, one no longer mapped in terms of traditional Indo-Tibetan or Chinese categories. But the question is: which new light?

First, historically oriented scholarship encourages us to approach Yogācāra Buddhism from the point of view of historicism, which holds that "everything in the human world has to be understood within its specific social-historical context." This perspective is taken to counteract "our natural tendency to hypostasize social-historical phenomena, as if they have an identity independent of their context"[5]—a view strikingly similar to Buddhist critiques of reification, we might add. In a sense, our modern emphasis on historical context is similar to the doxographic efforts of the Indians, Tibetans, and Chinese, in that we too are using an overarching rubric—historical development rather than insight into emptiness or the revelation of a single sūtra—to make sense of complex, seemingly contradictory teachings within the developing Buddhist traditions. When, for example, we examine the historical relation between the early Buddhist teachings, with their emphasis on dependent arising, and the Yogācāra analyses of mind

5. A "fundamental historicist principle is that everything in the human world—the state, society, morality, literature, science—is part of history. . . . It meant, first, that all human values and institutions change, so that nothing in the human world is eternal. This point is directed against our natural tendency to eternalize our values and institutions, as if they were true for humanity in general and held for all time. . . . It meant, second, that everything in the human world has to be understood within its specific social-historical context. The historicists stress the radical context-dependency of all social-historical phenomena, i.e., they hold that they do not exist apart from their specific context, such that they would change their identity in a different context. This point is directed against our natural tendency to hypostasize social-historical phenomena, as if they have an identity independent of their context" (Beiser 2007).

couched in those very same terms—mediated through the Mahāyāna lens of emptiness—we find the continuity between them to be glaringly obvious. Shifting our focus away from Yogācāra as a part of an ahistorical system of tenets and toward a more historically nuanced understanding provides refreshing new insights into these teachings and practices.[6]

For example, this historical approach suggests that the classical Yogācārins did not formulate the notion of storehouse consciousness simply because they were looking for a single, catchall mechanism, some primordial mind-soup from which the world appears, nor did they fabricate the notion of mere perception simply to dismiss the external world as an illusory projection of that mind—though it is easy enough to find passages that, taken in isolation, could be interpreted these ways. Rather, our approach shows how these critical concepts arose in response to particular issues formulated within their own historical context.

Specifically, based on its most systematic presentations by Asaṅga, we see that the notion of storehouse consciousness arose in response to a set of intractable issues that developed within the Abhidharma traditions that predated Yogācāra. That is, in order to understand our minds better, Abhidharma Buddhists sought to isolate and systematically catalog the physical and mental constituents of our conscious experience (which they called *dharmas*). But they soon found that these methods could not explain the complex continuity of individuals over time. To address these issues, the Yogācāra posited an additional level of dependently arisen cognitive processes—that is, a cognitive unconscious (*ālayavijñāna*). Similarly, as we will see in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*, the notion of mere perception (*vijñaptimātra*) arose within a dispute between Mahāyānists and Abhidharmists over the status of these dharmas in relation to our cognitive processes. Mere perception expresses, at bottom, the classical Mahāyāna argument that these dharmas do not possess their own nature or characteristics, that they are precisely empty of such natures. Critiquing the idea—and the visceral feeling—that we can know objects (*artha*) truly independently of our cognitive and affective dispositions is just one step toward a deeper

6. See Makransky 2008 for an insightful discussion of what historical scholarship offers to the study of Mahāyāna sūtras.

understanding of the dependent arising—the emptiness—of all dharmas, including both objects and subjects. Or so Vasubandhu argues.

And this progressive deconstruction of the apparent independence of objects and subjects, as our final chapter will demonstrate, was formulated to lead beings from ignorance and desire to liberation, from the wishful but deluded idea that we can hold fast to some fixed entity, whether external or internal, that would provide eternal and abiding peace. The radical message of the Buddhist traditions from start to finish is precisely that such peace comes from clearly seeing the dependent arising of all phenomena and letting go of such grasping—and that there are multiple, ever-evolving ways of articulating and realizing this.

Cognitive Perspectives

It is also impossible to ignore the deep parallels between traditional Yogācāra doctrines and the findings of cognitive science. As noted above, another name for Yogācāra, *Vijñānavāda*—"those who focus on cognitive awareness"—is for several reasons better understood as "cognitivism." First, *cognition* is actually cognate with *vijñāna*; they both share the same Indo-European root *jña/gno*. Second, the terms *cognitive* and *cognitivism* do not carry the metaphysical connotations of "idealism" inherited from Western and Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy (though for some it implies a mere conceptualism). Last, similar to Buddhist analyses, cognitive scientific findings are typically couched in terms of interactive processes, of "how things come about" rather than "what they are." This latter question invites the kind of reifying substantialism—the essentialism—that the formula of dependent arising so neatly avoids.

The "cognitive turn" in modern psychology focuses on *cognition* in the sense both of "the mental action or *process* of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses" and of "a perception, sensation, idea, or intuition *resulting from* the process of cognition."[7] Like the Yogācārins, cognitive scientists also emphasize the idea of

7. From https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/cognition. Note the "process/product ambiguity" in this definition. The word "painting" can refer to either the *process* of painting or to the picture that is the *product* of that process. "Cognition" similarly refers to both a

cognitive constructivism.[8] That is, it is virtually axiomatic in contemporary cognitive science that what we consciously perceive is both highly selected and deeply constructed. The "objects" we perceive are products of the constructive processes of our minds/brains, which sift and synthesize the disparate data impinging on our sense faculties and "fill in" the limited data these faculties provide (Blackmore 2005, 55–58). Our perceptions are the *products* of multiple interconnected cognitive systems that allow us to make enough sense of the world around us to successfully interact with it. And while the basic idea of cognitive constructivism—that, as objects of our experience, the *world* and our *selves* are constructs, simulations, or representations—is not yet common sense, it is no longer outside the mainstream of science. Nor does it entail the idea that "mind" alone truly exists. Rather, it steers a middle way between realism and idealism. Let's pause to consider why.

The terms *idealism* and *realism* are used in various ways with various meanings. In its most common usage, *idealism* refers to positions that hold that mind and mental events are the most fundamental reality and, therefore, objects in some fashion "depend upon mind." Idealism is typically contrasted with *realism*, which holds that objects exist independently of the mind and that our minds and perceptions are therefore dependent on such objects. In most usages, idealism and realism are opposites.

However, the idea that objects "depend upon mind" needs to be disambiguated. It can mean either a strong *ontological* dependence—something cannot exist without some mind cognizing it—or a weaker *epistemological* one—what we know depends on the mind cognizing it. The stronger ontological sense is more common both in Western and post-Yogācāra Indo-Tibetan Buddhist discourse. But the problem with both is that they tend to imagine we can definitively analyze objects or subjects independently of each other.

The "two extremes" of idealism and realism are avoided in the early Buddhist formula of dependent arising, which says that cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) arises dependent on something impinging on our sensory or mental faculties and that the meeting of the three is *contact*. The genius of

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process and to the product of that process: "a perception." Note that *cognition* here includes sensory processes and is not limited to concepts or ratiocination.

8. Noë and Thompson 2002; Hoffman 2000.

this formulation is that "mind" and "objects" depend upon one another and their respective faculties, and only arise—that is, come about—through interaction in a temporal process. The orientation of dependent arising thus seeks to discern *patterns* of interaction rather than to define the nature or "essence" of one or another of its components (faculty, object, or awareness). To consider any of them as "truly fundamental" not only departs from the view of dependent arising, but tends to reify or substantialize them, resulting in forms of idealism or realism.

We see parallels to all this in contemporary science. Biologists and social scientists argue that our experience is so fundamentally embedded in our bodies and physical and social environments that all ordinary knowledge is necessarily mediated by multiple layers of construction and interpretation.[9] These constitute our human cognitive domains, our human species-specific worlds.[10] And these species-specific modes of being-in-the-world are themselves the result of the extended, ongoing constructive feedback processes between organisms, their behavior, and their physical and social environments—in other words, evolution.[11] That is, our cognitive faculties and their associated modes of knowledge are profoundly embodied as well as historically embedded constructs.[12] Again, the idea that we cannot readily escape our own human embodiment, with all the limitations that entails, is hardly breaking news. But it does provide critical tools for understanding

9. "Modern adult cognition of the human kind is the product not only of genetic events taking place over many millions of years in evolutionary time but also of cultural events taking place over many tens of thousands of years in historical time and personal events taking place over many tens of thousands of hours in ontogenetic time" (Tomasello 1999, 216).

10. Metzinger (2009, 9) usefully points out that when the term *world* is used in contexts like this, it is shorthand for something like "world-model."

11. We are not addressing the more metaphysical dimensions of Buddhism or of Yogācāra, where we would find much more divergence with evolutionary theories. See Jackson 2020 for a characteristically clear presentation and astute analysis.

12. Ernst Mayr (1988, 15–16) argues: "The ability to make the switch from essentialist thinking to population thinking is what made the theory of evolution through natural selection possible. . . . The genotype (genetic program) is the product of a history that goes back to the origin of life, and thus it incorporates the 'experiences' of all ancestors. . . . It is this which makes organisms historical phenomena."

human experience that are largely consistent with general Buddhist and specifically Yogācāra cognitive analyses.[13]

In sum, we are no longer limited by the outdated dichotomy between realism and idealism, where the denial of a straightforward realist view—that objects in the world truly exist, roughly corresponding with how we understand them—necessarily entails that only the "mind that constructs" such objects truly exists. Although something akin to this dichotomous view has long framed the way that Yogācāra's critics, both traditional and modern, have interpreted their doctrines, the orientation of cognitive constructivism allows us to appreciate the aim and import of Yogācāra theories in a different light. While similar ideas are beginning to emerge in today's world, we still have much to learn from the way these insights, articulated so many centuries ago in classical India, were brought together to systematically analyze our collective illusions and point the way toward liberation from their numbing hold on our hearts and minds.

Structure of the Book

In addition to our primary aim of presenting its basic doctrines and practices in a comprehensive yet accessible fashion, the structure of this book and the selection of texts reflects our concerns with both the historical context and the conceptual coherence of classical Indian Yogācāra.

We first provide the important background of early Buddhist teachings, drawing upon the earliest large collection of texts in an Indic language, the Pāli canon, along with the conclusions of scholars who study these texts. Then we focus on the dependent arising of our cognitive processes and the dependent arising of our worlds. In the following chapter, we present developments within Abhidharma Buddhism, especially its analyses of our cognitive processes in terms of dharmas—all discrete phenomena, which were held to possess their own-nature (*svabhāva*) or own-characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*)—followed by analyses of the multiple problems these developments created. The chapter on early Mahāyāna, specifically on the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and the philosophical analyses of Nāgārjuna, highlights the contradictions between dependent arising and the idea that dharmas

13. This is especially so for what is now known as 4E cognition. See Newen et al. 2018.

have an own-nature—dependently arisen dharmas are, Mahāyānists argue, precisely *empty* of such nature. All these developments—from the fifth century BCE to roughly the third century CE—provide the context, the vocabulary, and the basic modes of analysis that our Yogācāra writers will in turn absorb, incorporate, and reformulate.

The Yogācāra chapters, 5–8, are the heart of the book. They present the basic Yogācāra ideas and doctrines, with a focus on our cognitive processes. They walk us through a small number of representative Yogācāra texts that exemplify, both within and among them, the relation between these concepts and their practical application.

We begin with the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*—the *Sūtra Explicating the Buddha's Implicit Intent*—which provides a basic outline of early Yogācāra. The sūtra, likely dating from the second or third century CE,[14] builds upon and incorporates earlier developments of Buddhism and epitomizes them within the framework of the *three turnings*: The early teachings of dependent arising and the Abhidharma idea of dharmas as possessing their own-nature are called the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma—that is, of the Buddha's teachings. The Mahāyāna critique of these ideas—that all dharmas are empty of such natures—is considered the second turning. And then the Yogācāra teachings themselves, which explicate the "intent" of emptiness, are considered the third and final turning of the wheel.

The sūtra also introduces the theory of the *three natures* as a reformulation of the problem of illusion: we imagine that phenomena have their own intrinsic natures or characteristics—this is their *imagined nature*. This occurs depending on multiple cognitive processes, especially our nonconscious constructive processes (*ālayavijñāna*)—this is their *dependent nature*. We can, however, come to see that such phenomena are mere perceptions (*vijñaptimātra*), which is a crucial stage in coming to see the emptiness of all phenomena—their *real nature*—which ultimately liberates us from such illusions. This is the framework within which the key cognitive concepts of *ālayavijñāna* and *vijñaptimātra* are introduced in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

Each of the three chapters that follow walks us through a single text, or set of textual sections, focusing on these specific topics. Sections of the *Stages of Yogic Practice* (*Yogācārabhūmi*) and the *Summary of Mahāyāna*

14. Lamotte 1935, 7–29.

(*Mahāyānasaṃgraha*), both attributed to Asaṅga, present the *ālayavijñāna* model. The *Twenty Verses* (*Viṃśatikā*) of Vasubandhu explains the role and rationale of *vijñaptimātra*. And *Distinguishing Dharmas and Their Ultimate Reality* (*Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*), attributed to the bodhisattva Maitreya, shows how these analytic and critical concepts function on the path to liberation. These specific texts each present their central concepts in a relatively accessible fashion and manageable length, while demonstrating the interrelationships between them.

A Note on Translations

As the chapters closely follow representative Buddhist texts in translation, I had to choose between many alternatives, balancing accessibility with accuracy. For early Buddhism, I drew upon texts from the Pāli canon because they are ably translated into English and readily available to most readers. Historically speaking, their content is broadly congruent with other collections of early Buddhist texts, specifically the Chinese Āgamas, which together "constitute the common ancient heritage of Buddhism" (Gethin 1998, 44). For early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, I drew upon Thich Nhat Hanh's engaging translation of the *Diamond Sūtra* and Jay Garfield's philosophical explication of Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* for similar reasons: they are more appropriate for our purposes than other excellent but more philologically oriented works. I mostly draw upon the exacting translation of the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* by the Buddhavacana Translation Group at 84000.co because of its painstaking accuracy as well as availability: it is published online in its entirety, complete with glossary, intertextual indices, and links to the Tibetan text. It is an exemplar of translation methodology in the digital age. I have provided my own translations for sections of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, which are not readily available in English. And I rely on two excellent but unpublished translations of the *Twenty Verses* (with translators' permission) by John Dunne and by Jonathan Gold et al. for their precision and clarity, and because they provide independent voices that buttress my less-traditional interpretations. Finally, I made my own translation of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* and Vasubandhu's commentary on it, having become absorbed in its luminous thought-world one wondrous summer not long ago in Kathmandu.

Part I

Background and Context of Yogācāra

1

Early Buddhism

THE NEXT TWO chapters examine the life and teachings of the Buddha. Flourishing in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE, the Buddha taught for a full forty-five years, from the time of his awakening to his *parinirvāṇa*, or passing. He instituted a monastic tradition that has persisted to this day and gave teachings that were passed down orally for a few hundred years before being written down.

We are examining the account preserved in the Pāli discourses (*sutta*) for several reasons. First, despite their repetitive and disparate nature—a result of oral transmission—the profound genius of the Awakened One (*buddha*) still speaks to us across so many centuries.

Second, the Buddha's distinctive mode of analyzing the human condition evidenced by these discourses—that of *dependent arising*—is subtle and profound. It analyzes experience in terms of patterns of interaction, rather than as independent entities acting upon independent objects in a seemingly independent world, a perspective that has far-reaching implications for how we understand our lives. These teachings are not just a critique of *essentialism*—the idea that underlying each phenomenon is a unitary, unchanging essence. They also avoid the opposite extreme of *nihilism*, which denies that there are either consequences to our behavior or any dependable way of understanding the world.

This way of thinking, though quite simple, is counterintuitive; it is not what we imagine we experience. Seeing phenomena in terms of patterns of relationships, and the conditions they depend on to come about—to arise—is to see them as dependently arising. This very mode of analysis avoids seeing entities or objects in isolation from these patterns and conditions.

The third reason is that these teachings were elaborately articulated by our Yogācārin writers some seven to eight centuries after the time of the

Buddha. If we overlook these early discourses, we could easily lose sight of this overwhelming continuity and end up focusing instead on Yogācāra's innovative doctrines—as if they did not arise out of, and depend upon, their own larger historical and doctrinal context.

This chapter will present the general worldview of early Buddhism, while the next chapter will pursue more detailed analyses of our cognitive processes.

The Four Noble Truths: Modeling Causal Relations

When Siddhārtha Gotama, the future Buddha, finally came to sit beneath the Bodhi Tree, he came to realize complete awakening, *bodhi*: purifying his vision and seeing reality *as it is*, he was no longer caught in the cycle of compulsive rebirth driven by karma—that is, saṃsāra. He was fully liberated and had become the Buddha, the Awakened One. This is *the* paradigmatic event at the center of the early Buddhist tradition.

Tradition has it that the specific contents of his liberating insight were formulated in his first sermon, which he gave at the Deer Park in Sarnath, *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma*.[15] The discourse first sets forth the "middle way" between sensual pleasure and self-mortification, and then points the way for others to achieve similar results. Note that these are guidelines to be practiced, not propositions to espouse or creeds to believe.

> This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood.
> This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned.
> This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized.
> This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed.

The contents of this teaching reflect his reformulation of the emerging worldview in fifth-century BCE India: The vicious cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) is driven by karmic actions informed by ignorance and

15. *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*, SN 56.11. Bodhi 2005, 75–78. Given the level of systematization in it, Gombrich (2002, 62) suggests that this sermon was composed considerably later.

desire, but one can be liberated (*nirvāṇa*) from this cycle by practicing the path of wisdom and detachment. However, the Buddha did not simply repackage this shared worldview in a more rational fashion. He put the principle of causality, or more precisely *causal dependence*, at the center of his analysis of the problem of life and its solution. This emphasis on causal analysis is the most distinctive feature of classical Buddhist teachings and arguably its major contribution to world thought.

We see this in that first sermon, especially in the four noble truths, which can be understood as "four ennobling realities" about our lives—whose realization is ennobling.[16] The first noble truth describes the reality of *duḥkha*, of dissatisfaction, frustration, and unease. We suffer from getting sick, getting old, and dying. These entail subtle and not so subtle forms of anxiety, dis-ease, and dissatisfaction. The *reality* of all this, the discourse declares, "is to be fully understood."

The second noble truth, the cause or *origin* of our dissatisfaction, is our craving for pleasure, for continued existence, or conversely, craving for our incessant anxiety and unease to cease. It is not enough to simply desire this, however, because our past actions (*karma*) continue to fuel and perpetuate our experiences. It is only when we fully appreciate the *fact* that we suffer and how pervasive it is that we begin to seek the *causes* of our unease: our craving for pleasure and avoidance of displeasure. These are the causes "to be abandoned."

The Buddha then declares in the third noble truth that this dis-ease can end once we stop these causes: *cessation* of *duḥkha* is "the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving." As such, it is something "to be realized."

16. "The temptation to understand these four 'truths' as functioning as a kind of Buddhist creed should be resisted; they do not represent 'truth claims' that one must intellectually assent to on becoming a Buddhist. Part of the problem here is the word 'truth.' The word *satya* (P. *sacca*) can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as 'real' or 'actual thing.' That is, we are not dealing here with propositional truths with which we must either agree or disagree, but with four 'true things' or 'realities' whose nature, we are told, the Buddha finally understood on the night of his awakening. The teachings of the Buddha thus state that suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation are realities which we fail to see as they are, and this is as true for the 'Buddhist' as the 'non-Buddhist'" (Gethin 1998, 60).

This is achieved by the way or *path* leading to that cessation, the fourth ennobling reality, "which is to be developed."

The basic structure of this teaching follows a traditional medical model, presenting the diagnosis—suffering—followed by an analysis of its causes. It then describes the prognosis or cure—freedom from suffering—prescribing the path that will bring about that cure. This is not accomplished by simply believing in or reciting the teachings. It is accomplished by a direct understanding that fundamentally transforms one's outlook and behavior, and this is couched in causal terms: suffering occurs, it has causes; when these causes stop, suffering ends. In other words, "Whatever is subject to origination is subject to cessation."

It is hard to overestimate the implications of this orientation, both for the deep insights it provides and the way it circumscribes Buddhist thought. Anything that is not concerned with or analyzed in terms of the arising and cessation of suffering and its causes was effectively irrelevant to the Buddhist project. This marks a boundary condition, as it were, for early Buddhist teaching that is useful to keep in mind.

This view—one focused on causal processes rather than unchanging essences—is clearly expressed in one of the core Buddhist doctrines, the "three marks of existence": (1) that all phenomena are in flux, impermanent, (2) that they lack unchanging essences or selves (*anātman*), and (3) that, given these conditions, sentient beings are fraught with dissatisfaction and anxiety, heartache and pain. To these marks is often added the opposite and optimistic assertion: nirvāṇa is peace.

These are central facts of our condition: Given the realities of change, impermanence, and insecurity, we suffer insofar as we try to grasp onto things, especially our sense of identity, on the assumption, as much unconscious as not, that such grasping is entirely possible. Correcting this error and seeing the world as it truly is—fleeting, transient, and interdependent—is, Buddhists argue, an "ennobling truth," a wake-up call to stop the causes of suffering in all its permutations.

Much of early Buddhist thought and practice is thus aimed at understanding how it is that we so grossly misunderstand the world and ourselves, and how we can learn to overcome these illusions by seeing things more clearly and behaving accordingly.

Dependent Arising: Identifying Patterns of Interaction

These critical analyses expressing what the world lacks—permanence, unchanging essences, and so on—are complemented by the constructive work of explaining how we actually function without unchanging identities. Seeing ourselves in the light of these causal analyses, Buddhists argue, undermines our sense that we are wholly autonomous agents independent of the world around us. This in turn frees us to engage the world more fully, more deeply, and above all, more compassionately.

All this is implicit in the view of dependent arising. Its basic formulation is:

> When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases (MN 79.8).

This basic formula "when *x* is, *y* arises" states that whatever occurs only comes about in dependence upon its enabling conditions and persists only as long as those conditions persist. In the early Buddhist view, we can best understand causal relations—how things come to be—by analyzing the multiple conditions on which they *depend* and the patterns of interaction out of which they *arise*—that is, their *dependent arising*. In this deceptively simple formula lies much of the distinctive Buddhist worldview, the implications of which generations of Buddhists, including the Yogācārins, gradually draw out in the centuries that follow.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of this approach is that it dispenses with the notion of fixed entities or unchanging essences altogether. Instead of asking how apparently independent agents act upon an apparently objective world, analyses couched in terms of dependent arising ask: under what conditions does such and such a phenomenon arise? Or, more elaborately: what set of conditions operates in what recurrent ways so that it typically gives rise to what kind of phenomena? This shifts attention away from our usual focus on agents and their actions and toward the complex, dynamic interdependence of phenomena. This is typically expressed in terms of *patterns* of causal interactions.

This is exemplified in the early discourses, where the Buddha often transposes questions from one expressed in an active voice to one couched in an impersonal or passive voice—from, in his terms, an "unfit" question to a "fit" one:

> "Who, now, Lord, is it who craves?"
>
> "Not a fit question," said the Exalted One. "I am not saying someone craves. If I were saying so, the question would be a fit one. But I am not saying so. And [since] I [am] not saying so, were anyone to ask thus: 'Conditioned now by what, Lord, is craving?' this would be a fit question. And the fit answer there would be: 'Conditioned by feeling is craving'" (SN 12.12).

From this perspective, the classic Buddhist dismissal of unchanging selves, essences, or entities stems not so much from logical first principles, such as the proposition "everything changes," as from the very *form* of the question being asked: "How do things come to be?" We see this clearly in a similar avoidance of essences, entities, or substantive selves in modern science.[17] Science also asks *how things come to be* rather than, as most of the classical Greeks and Hindus did, what they *essentially are*: Abstract essences, as Havelock notes in early Greek philosophy, "are not born that way or become or are made so"; they timelessly are.[18]

17. Gombrich (1996, 1) quotes philosopher of science Karl Popper on the nonessentialism and nominalism of modern science: "The scientific use of definitions . . . may be called its nominalist interpretation, as opposed to its Aristotelian or essentialist interpretation. In modern science, only nominalist definitions occur—that is to say, shorthand symbols or labels are introduced in order to cut a long story short."

18. See Havelock 1983, 14, on a similar transition in Greek culture from an oral, situational ethos to the beginning of philosophy, with its abstract terms with clear, fixed definitions. "From the standpoint of a sophisticated philosophical language, such as was available to Aristotle, what was lacking [in previous eras] was a set of commonplace but abstract terms which by their interrelations could describe the physical world conceptually; terms such as space, void, matter, body, element, motion, immobility, change, permanence, substratum, quantity, quality, dimension, unit, and the like. Aside altogether from the coinage of abstract nouns, the conceptual task also required the *elimination of verbs of doing and acting and happening*, one may even say, of living and dying, in favor of a syntax which states permanent relationships between conceptual terms systematically. For this purpose, the required linguistic mechanism was furnished by the timeless present of the verb to be—the copula

Thought exercise 1: A river

The implications of dependent arising are subtle and we will examine its detailed formulation later in the chapter. We will first approach it using the analogy of a river, drawing from an early Buddhist text we will examine further below, the *Questions of King Milinda*. The monk Nāgasena asks King Milinda a series of questions about how a stream or river keeps going. These questions shift the focus from actions of agents to patterns of interaction—that is, to dependent arising. Nāgasena asks: How did the river come into being? What conditions keep it going? And what is a river?

> "When it is raining, by what means may the water run away?"
>
> "It might run away by means of some slope."
>
> "But, sire, if it continued to rain, by what means would that later amount of water run away?"
>
> "It would take the same course as the earlier water."
>
> "Then, sire, does the earlier water instruct the later, saying, 'You run away by the same course as I do,' or does the later water instruct the earlier, saying, 'I will also run away by the same course as you will take'?"
>
> "No, reverend sir, there is no conversation between them; they run away because there is a slope."[19]

The stream runs in the same place as before because of a slope, where it eventually carves out a rut or furrow. Copying the text's dialogic format, we will ask: Who made the river?

> Did the river come about by any one of its components alone?
>
> No. No single one of these components could, by itself, bring about the river. The river comes about—it "arises"—only through the recurrent interaction *between* these components over time.
>
> But then, did the river*bed* come about by itself?

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of analytic statement. The angles *are* equal to two right angles. *They are not born that way or become or are made so.*" [emphasis added]

19. Mendis 1993, 49.

> No, the riverbed was not there before the river current.
>
> So did the river flow there by itself?
>
> No, the river did not flow there before there was a riverbed. The two "co-arose." As that first trickle of water ran downhill, it slowly eroded a small furrow, which attracted later rainfall that gradually deepened it into a trench, which later attracted further rainfall, and so forth. In this way, the river and the riverbed arose together, mutually reinforcing each other.

In short, the very question "Who made the river?" is "not a fit question." Both the river and the riverbed came to be as a result of *recurrent interactions* between the river current and the riverbed, not by either one of them alone. As we know from the study of ecology, most natural systems work in similar ways.

We can take this one step further and ask about the very thing being considered: the river.

> What exactly *is* the river?
>
> Does the term *river* refer to any single one of its components apart from the others—say, the river current apart from the riverbed, or the riverbed apart from the river current?
>
> No. We cannot truly separate these components from each other. The river only comes about in the first place through the repeated interaction of its parts, and we call it a *river* only as long as this persists. We can separate these components for the sake of analysis, giving them separate names and so on, but to understand how a "river" works, we have to look at their *patterns* of interaction.
>
> So does the term *river* refer to an unchanging, permanent entity?
>
> No. Each and every component of the river is constantly changing—water sources vary, erosion continues, and so forth.

The term *river* is thus what Buddhists call a "convenient designation"; as Karl Popper put it, it is a name we use to refer to a pattern of interconnected processes in order "to cut a long story short."

What implications can we draw from this simple example? First, we see "things" as coming about through causes and conditions and persisting only as long as those conditions persist. Things are seen as dependent processes or events, not unchanging entities.

Second, they do not come about by means of a single agent or actor controlling them either from inside or outside of the processes themselves. There is no master executive, no intelligent designer calling the shots. Even the more enduring structures, such as the riverbed, only come about through recurrent interactions between these various components. Like a thunderstorm or an ocean current, these events occur "by themselves." In contemporary terms, they self-organize.

And third, using nouns to refer to "things" is just a shorthand way to refer not to "real," permanent entities or agents but to patterns of interactive processes whose persistence over time we tend to mistake as separate or permanent. That is, we tend to think of processes as things; we "thing-ify" or reify them. On the other hand, when we view the world and our experience in terms of dependent arising, we see them as mutually conditioning, interactive processes to which we give names—that is, we designate (de-*sign*-ate) them as such for our own convenience.

Thought exercise 2: Habit formation

Next, let's apply this approach to human behavior by considering how habits work. We will examine habits in terms of the three categories into which the formula of dependent arising has been traditionally divided: causal action, the effect or result of these actions, and our reactions to these effects—in short, cause, result, and reaction.

Taking a sip of coffee causes our heart to beat more quickly due to caffeine's interaction with the neurotransmitters in our nervous system, which boosts multiple physiological processes. This feels good for a while, but as the caffeine metabolizes, the pleasant effect wears off. These are the first two steps: *cause* and *result*. In response, we typically want more of that good feeling and less of the letdown that follows. These *reactions*—desire for pleasure and aversion to its loss—typically lead to another *action*, another sip of coffee. This leads to more pleasure soon followed by more letdown, which again evokes responses of desire or aversion, leading to further action, and

so on.[20] Of course, it is not a habit if we only do this once or twice. But as we routinely drink coffee, our nervous system comes to require caffeine to operate effectively; indeed, many people experience withdrawal headaches without it. We have now become habituated to caffeine.

Let's ask a similar series of questions as before: Where exactly *is* the habit? Is the habit in the action alone, in the act of drinking? No, that is not enough; it would not be a habit without the expected result and the desire for more. Is the habit just the effect? Also, no; there would be no habit without the causal action and intention driving it. Similarly, our reaction to the pleasure or displeasure arises because we know that our actions will lead to certain results. What constitutes a habit, therefore, is a *pattern of interaction*, the way its components repeatedly come together, neither any single element separately nor in isolation.

As with the river and riverbed, this entails a temporal dimension. A habit is not just a behavioral pattern that occurs in the present. It also involves the cumulative results—the structures—that have come about from its components having *regularly and repeatedly* interacted in the past. Last, the components of these patterns are defined *in terms of* their ongoing interaction, not as entities that exist independently and only thereafter come into relationship.

To highlight how commonsensical all this is, we might ask where my coffee habit was before I started drinking coffee at the age of twenty-five. Most would agree that it did not erupt into existence from some unchanging Platonic form, eternally preexisting beyond time and space. Rather, it came into being, like the river, solely through the recurrent interaction of its components—not by any one of them alone but by the cumulative effects of their repeated interaction. Conversely, where do our habits go when they stop? To coffee-habit heaven, where all the good brews go? This is not a "fit question" either. Just as the habit did not preexist the recurrent patterns of interaction, it does not post-exist them either. It simply ceases when its components cease to interact in that specific way. It doesn't *go anywhere*, because it is not a "thing"; it is a *name*, a designation, for a pattern of pro-

20. This is similar to the analysis found in *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg (2014). He analyzes habits in terms of a cue (like a reaction), which leads to a routine (an action), followed by a reward (the result), which then conditions the cue that furthers the routine.

cesses, and patterns don't *exist* in a substantive sense; they either recur or they don't.[21]

But if habits don't exist in a substantial sense, does this mean habits have no "reality" or effect at all? Mark Twain famously said it was easy to quit smoking, he'd done it lots of times! The Buddhist point is that insofar as we cannot quit our habits, we are bound by them, and to that extent we are unfree. We therefore cannot say they have no effect whatsoever. Rather, they are "real" in the sense of having an *observable, recurrent, experiential effect* rather than a locatable, unchanging, substantive existence.[22]

Thought exercise 3: A headache

This helps us approach the Buddhist idea of no-self, that there is no underlying, unchanging entity that serves as the *subject* or agent of experience. When we have a headache, we experience a sensation we recognize as pain, throbbing in a place we call our head. Each throb reminds us that the pain is closely connected to our heartbeat and, if we are unlucky enough to have noisy housemates, to our other sense faculties as well. We also typically have a yearning to alleviate that pain. We clearly know: "I have a headache now, darn it, and I am going to fix it." But do we know this?

Following our previous line of questioning, let's ask: *where* is the headache? It does not seem to be in our arms or legs; it is, after all, a *head*ache. But it doesn't occur in any single part of the brain, since we know that the brain centers that process pain signals are not the same ones that support awareness of that pain. Without such pain signals, we would not be aware of the pain; and without that awareness, would we even *be* in pain? Moreover, there is not, according to mainstream cognitive science, any single location where all this is "put together." So the *experience* of pain depends, at the very least, on the interaction between multiple processes in our bodies and minds and is not located in any one of them alone. It does not refer to, nor is it explained by, any singular "subject" of experience. This is a simple but profound point.

21. "The study of pattern is crucial to the understanding of living systems because systemic properties, as we have seen, arise from a configuration of ordered relationships. Systemic properties are properties of a pattern. What is destroyed when a living organism is dissected is its pattern. The components are still there, but the configuration of relationships among them—the pattern—is destroyed, and thus the organism dies." Capra 1996, 81.

22. See Barbour 1997, 9–24, for a similar interpretation of causality in modern science.

Next, let's ask what *caused* this headache? Did any single component of our bodily or mental processes create it? No, the headache came about in dependence on a particular relationship, a set of recurrent interactions, between our body and mind. And, like the river and riverbed, this relationship did not spontaneously appear just now, in the last few minutes or hours. Rather, the complex relationship between our bodily and mental processes developed, like the river and riverbed, through recurrent interactions occurring over long periods of time, in which they repeatedly influenced and supported each other. Our headache has no single, unilateral cause either. It is supported by a host of conditions, based on recurrent interactions.

Finally, we might ask: Where was the headache before it arose? Where did it go when it was over? These questions are as unintelligible as asking where a spark was before it sparked. In a world comprised of events which arise and cease in dependence on causes and conditions, there are no intelligible answers to such "unfit questions." In terms of dependent arising, the headache occurs when all these conditions come together and interact, without the need to posit any central agent or experiencing subject. It refers, rather, to a *specific pattern of interactive processes*, not of any one of them independently, nor of some unchanging entity existing beyond or behind it all.

These thought exercises help us understand the early Buddhist view that we are comprised of sets of habits—habits of body, speech, and mind, along with the structures that subserve them—that have developed through recurrent patterns of interaction and whose effective reality is the causal efficacy, the inertial energies, that such actions and interactions exert. Think about it: We are bound by *something* that is not a thing but a pattern, that does not *exist* but occurs, and that both came from nowhere and goes nowhere. Such are the workings and life cycles of our habits, our beings, our lives. The implications of all this require some time to fully appreciate.

The five aggregates: body-mind functioning without a fixed self

We can now better understand the Buddha's rejection of the notion of an unchanging self (*ātman*)—an idea newly formulated in a contemporaneous collection of Hindu texts called the Upaniṣads—and his view of the individual as, in effect, always a work in progress. The Buddha saw human

beings as having come about over time through the cumulative effects of actions across countless past lifetimes—through dependent arising. The Buddha's critique of an unchanging self also applies to the moment-to-moment interactions among the various components that constitute each individual. He grouped these into five distinct kinds of processes called *aggregates* (*skandha*). Briefly, these are our experiences of (1) materiality (*rūpa*), (2) sensation or feeling (*vedanā*), (3) recognition or apperception (*saṃjñā*), (4) intentions and other karmic formations (*saṃskāra*), and (5) awareness (*vijñāna*). As the term *aggregate* suggests, these do not refer to five separate things but to categories of processes that constitute our experience.

The first is materiality—*bodily form*—often defined as the experience of resistance. When something impinges on one of the sense organs (body, eyes, ears, nose, or mouth), this produces a sensation that is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. For example, when our blood pulses and our head aches, we feel an unpleasant *sensation*. We *recognize* and identify the sensation based on past experience: it is a "headache." Usually this recognition, this labeling, occurs so quickly and automatically we fail to even notice it. The fifth category is the simple *awareness* of the experience—in this case pain—to which we typically respond with the fourth aggregate, some purposeful *intention*, such as seeking a remedy. None of these five is permanent or independent, nor are any of them the central controller or singular subject of experience. In short, none of them fit the classic definition of *ātman*. Hence, they are all not-*ātman* (*anātman*).

The Middle Way between Existence and Nonexistence

These analyses help make sense of the Buddhist rejection of an unchanging *ātman* as the definition of who or what we are. For many people this is the most vexing of all Buddhist ideas. Simply put, instead of asking what we truly are, in some ultimate, unchanging sense, the Buddha framed these questions in causal terms: How does suffering arise? What are the conditions that bring it about? What will bring it to an end? This perspective not only discards the idea of an unchanging identity or self as effectively irrelevant; it similarly discards the twin notions of *existence* (*sat*) and *nonexistence*

(*asat*) insofar as they refer to or assume unchanging, permanent entities. The Buddha thus declares in the *Discourse for Kaccānagotta* (Skt. Kātyāyana):

> This world, Kaccāna, for the most part, depends upon a duality—upon the idea of existence and the idea of nonexistence. But for one who sees the *origin* of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of *nonexistence* in regard to the world. And for one who sees the *cessation* of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of *existence* in regard to the world....
>
> "All exists": Kaccāna, this is one extreme. "All does not exist": this is the second extreme (Bodhi 2005, 357; SN 12.15).

The Buddha is outlining here another middle way, not between sensual indulgence and asceticism as in his first sermon, but the middle way between the extremes of existence and nonexistence. As he points out in this passage, when we understand that whatever we experience eventually comes to an end, then we will not think in terms of permanent existence. Similarly, when we understand that new experiences, new habits, continually spring forth depending upon causes and conditions, then we will not think in terms of absolute nonexistence. Neither of these two extremes can account for the incessant arising, perpetuation, and passing away of dependently arisen phenomena, such as rivers, habits, or sentient beings.

This is why the claim by the Buddha's Hindu contemporaries that what we truly are is an unchanging Ātman could not answer the Buddha's crucial question: How do specific actions lead to specific results? In other words, what is the origination and cessation of suffering? This problem comes into sharp relief with the analysis of karma, since karma refers to the relation between cause and effect in moral or ethical terms: Deeds that are instigated by good intentions lead to pleasant results, and those driven by bad intentions lead to unpleasant results. But both actions and their effects are not only events that occur in time, they also require some change or alteration of the actor and whoever experiences its results. A *truly unchanging* Ātman could thus neither act nor experience the result of actions. In short, a truly unchanging self or soul would be causally *unrelated* to either a karmic cause

or a karmic effect and therefore could play no explanatory role in the relations karma refers to. Describing the regularities of a moral order—that is, of karma—requires thinking in terms of causality, which operates relationally and temporally.

This is, by the way, similar to modern science's rejection of unchanging entities. Unchanging entities play no explanatory role in causal interactions, since, by definition, they lie outside the causal nexus. But the Buddha did not refute these ideas simply from a logical point of view; they are incommensurate with his basic orientation, which is to understand the arising of suffering and its cessation.

The Two Truths: The Questions of King Milinda

> There is suffering, but none who suffers;
> doing exists, although there is no doer.
> Extinction is, but no extinguished person;
> although there is a path, there is no goer.
> —Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*

If the notion of unchanging essences is not explanatorily relevant to a world of flux and change, how then do we account for the coherence of things, especially as they persist through time? Specifically, if there is no unchanging self to hold it all together, how do Buddhists make sense of experience without an experiencer, the apparent continuity of identity over time, and most crucially, the relationship between karmic cause and effect? Having rejected the idea of a self that persists unchanging throughout all time—the extreme of existence—how do they avoid the opposite extreme of nonexistence, in which there would be no continuity whatsoever, including the continuity of each individual's unripened karmic seeds, especially after death?

Many of these Buddhism 101-type questions are treated with elegant clarity in an early text we have already glimpsed, the *Questions of King Milinda*, dating from just before the Common Era. It is presented in the form of a dialogue between a Buddhist monk named Nāgasena and an

Indo-Greek king in northwest India named Milinda.[23] This text describes how the world, our minds, and karma all operate not only without any supervening agent in charge of it all but also without an unchanging entity experiencing it.

First, Nāgasena presents the standard Buddhist denial of *ātman*, declaring that there are no persons as such, only names for the collection of aggregates. We are, he states: "only a designation, a label, a concept, an expression, a mere name because there is no person as such that is found" (Mendis 1993, 29).

Like most beginning students of Buddhism, King Milinda is deeply puzzled by how this denial of an unchanging *ātman* could be reconciled with the continuity of karma in this and future lifetimes. And he worried that without such an *ātman* there would be "nothing wholesome or unwholesome . . . neither fruit nor result of good or bad deeds" (29). It would, in short, undermine the idea that we will experience the consequences of our actions, leading to the moral nihilism that nonexistence threatens.

Nāgasena responds indirectly by first asking Milinda about the chariot he arrived on. I paraphrase:

> "Does the chariot exist in any one of its parts or pieces?"
>
> "No, no single one of these is the chariot itself. The chariot, as a single, partless entity, cannot be found."
>
> "Does this mean," King Milinda immediately concludes, "that the 'chariot' is only a word, only a sound—that is, that it is nonexistent?"
>
> "No," Nāgasena insists, "it is due to *all of the parts working together* that we can say that the 'chariot' exists as a mere designation" (31).

Similarly, in the case of the five aggregates, Nāgasena now explains:

> It is because of materiality, feeling, apperception, karmic formations, and awareness that "Nāgasena" exists as a mere designa-

23. This is the Pāli equivalent of Menander. See Mendis 1993, 1–6, for a brief discussion of this text's early history and origins in northwest India.

> tion. However, in the *ultimate sense*, there is no person as such that is found (31).

He concludes by citing an early Pāli text (SN 5.10):

> Just as when the parts are rightly set,
> the word "chariot" is spoken,
> so when there are the aggregates,
> it is the convention to say "a being" (31).

Nāgasena is introducing here the important distinction, which will later be reformulated in both Abhidharma and Mahāyāna Buddhism, between an *ultimate* sense, in which no unchanging self exists, and a *conventional* sense in which it is necessary and useful to speak of the relative existence of what we call "a being."

Nāgasena is also avoiding the two extremes of ultimate existence and nonexistence by arguing that the lack of permanence does not entail that something has no causal efficacy, no reality, whatsoever. Milinda did, after all, arrive on something we *call* a chariot. Existence and nonexistence are not the only alternatives. Rather, Nāgasena describes the "middle way" between these two extremes by emphasizing causal continuity within change and treating its multiple components as conventional designations.

This is illustrated by a series of similes titled *Neither the Same nor Another.* Again I paraphrase:

> The Lamp Flame: Is the lamp flame that burns at the beginning of the night exactly the same as the flame burning at the end of the night? No. So is the later flame completely different from the first flame? No.
>
> Curds from Milk: Is the milk from a cow exactly the same as the curds or butter made from that milk or something completely different? Neither.
>
> Rather, there is causal continuity between before and after: "A continuity of phenomena is linked together. It uprises as one and ceases as another, linked together as though there were no before and after. Hence, it is neither the same nor another" (40).

The same line of reasoning is then applied to the continuity of a person. Since there is not an exact identity between ourselves as young babies and who we are as adults, does this mean that our baby self was one thing and our adult self is now completely another? No, Nāgasena explains, there is an *unbroken causal continuity* between "ourselves" as babies and as adults: "It is neither the same nor another, but the subsequent consciousness is reckoned (together with) the preceding consciousness" (40). Like a river, we are a stream of being, a stream of consciousness—and living downstream from our actions.

On Karmic Potential and Personal Continuity

Early Buddhism, like other early Indian traditions, considered karma a natural law, like gravity—it is just how the universe works. It requires no master creator or agent directing or enforcing it; moral cause and effect happen "by themselves." Unlike scientific naturalism, however, early Indian Buddhism saw causal regularity operating in moral dimensions as well, directed by the nature of one's intentional actions.

For moral cause and effect to operate in this context, for karma to work, the consequences of one's actions must, at least potentially, be experienced at a future time, even in future lives. If there were no continuity between lifetimes, if everything ended at one's death, then the potential consequences of one's deeds would also end. Mother Theresa and Hitler would be in the same state right after they died: they would both be dead, pure and simple. There would, in other words, be *no moral consequences* of one's actions after death, hence no moral order in the universe, no Dharma, either secular or spiritual. And for traditional Buddhists, this cutting off of the consequences of our actions—their nonexistence—suggests the kind of moral nihilism that so worried the good king.

Therefore, there is a profoundly *moral* dimension to the search for a middle way between an unchanging self that exists outside of karmic processes and the utter extinction of the individual at death. The Buddhists called these the extreme of *eternalism* (*śāsvatavāda*) and the extreme of *annihilationism* (or *nihilism*, *ucchedavāda*). They emphasized not just the continuity of the individual but the continuity of the consequences of their actions as well.

Accordingly, King Milinda returns to the question so many students ask when hearing about no-self: if there is ultimately no "real" self, then how can there be personal responsibility both within this lifetime and over multiple lifetimes? He asks:

> If, Revered Sir, this name and form does not itself take rebirth, would one not be freed from evil deeds? (Mendis, 1993, 45)

If it is not exactly the same *name and form* (*nāma-rūpa*, shorthand for the mental and physical constituents of a person) that takes rebirth, wouldn't that mean that the consequences of bad deeds simply disappear? Again, Nāgasena replies: No, there is sufficient *causal continuity* both within and between lifetimes.

Nāgasena then gives a series of analogies to illustrate such continuity—and moral consequences—within a single lifetime. Nāgasena mentions a mango thief who claims he is innocent on the grounds that the mango seed the farmer had planted earlier is not the same as the fruit the thief just stole; therefore the farmer who sowed the seed would not rightfully own the fruit. Second: someone who accidentally sets his barn on fire, which then spreads to a nearby field, claims he is innocent on the grounds that the fire that burned the crops was not the same fire he set in his barn. Nāgasena's response, the early Buddhist response, is that there is sufficient causal continuity between actions and their consequences over multiple lifetimes to ensure such responsibility:

> Even so, Sire, by means of this name and form one does a good or bad deed, and because of this deed another name and form takes rebirth; therefore, one is not freed from evil deeds. (Mendis, 1993, 46)

These similes, although engaging, do not *explain* the karmic continuity, let alone the rebirth, of individuals. They do, however, introduce analogies that later Buddhist traditions will use to address these questions more systematically.

The "individual," echoing the river metaphor, is said to be a *stream* of consciousness or thoughts (*cittasantāna*), continuously changing yet

continuously perpetuating itself through karmic actions. The early texts also refer to the continuity of karmic *potential* using the metaphor of seeds, one of several agricultural terms used to describe the karmic process: karma as action is like sowing a *seed*, where it remains in a seed-like state of potentiality until it *ripens* into a full karmic *fruit*. Accordingly, in this view, we have lived countless lifetimes in the past and have therefore accumulated countless karmic seeds.[24]

King Milinda asks where such karmic potentiality "remains," a question that will continue to haunt later Buddhists, including Yogācārins. Nāgasena responds with his own question: "Is it possible to point to the fruits of a tree that has not yet borne fruit and say that the fruits are either here or there?" No, the king replies. Nāgasena continues: "In the same way, so long as the life continuum is not cut off, it is not possible to point to these deeds and say that they remain either here or there" (Mendis 1993, 60).[25]

So far, the *Questions of King Milinda* has illustrated several key doctrines through simile and metaphor: the middle way between absolute existence and complete nonexistence; the notion of causal continuity (the dependence of a later state upon a previous one); and the idea of nominal existence, that is, of conventional designation. These ideas are used to explain how there can be continuity through change, how people—as well as plants—can grow and change over time while still exhibiting similar characteristics and, more importantly, embodying *causal continuity*, especially the continuity of karmic potential. And all this is done without resorting to the conceptual cul-de-sac of essences and substantial entities.[26]

24. "Ānanda, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, karma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture for their consciousness to be established in an inferior [middling, or superior] realm. In this way there is the production of renewed existence in the future" (AN 3.76; Bodhi 2012, 310).

25. Interestingly, the notion of potential is similarly intractable in neuroscience. I have asked my colleagues about the action potentials of neurons, an essential notion in neuroscience. Even though such potentials have no exact location and one can't say where they "exist," they are nevertheless reliably quantifiable. Much the same is true for the gravitational potential of a book on a table, which is a relation of its mass to the mass of the Earth and which would be "released" if and when it falls off that table. It is measurable, reliable, functional. Yet, we can't say it "exists" either here or there.

26. Tellingly each field in the modern sciences has had to dispense with the notion of essences in order to progress. According to eminent biologist Ernst Mayr (1988, 15), "The ability to

Challenging the Cartesian Theater

One crucial question still lingers: how can there be subjectivity without a "real" subject that experiences something?

The difficulty this raises is both conceptual and affective. Most scientifically educated people can readily conceive of natural phenomena coming about without an independent agent controlling them either from within or without. The river flows without telling itself to do so, grass grows without a master cell in charge, as does a storm brew, the earth quake, and the sun shine. Cellular metabolism, the dynamic energies of warm air, geological pressures, light waves—all exhibit causal regularities that operate *by themselves*. But can we make sense of human experience this way? Do our analyses of headaches and habits suffice? Surely, we object, we are always the subjects of our own experiences, so obviously *in here* looking *out there*. How could Buddhists deny such a commonsense feeling?

The *Questions of King Milinda* addresses this question, albeit in fairly general terms. First, in the section "No Experiencer Is Found," Nāgasena challenges the notion that we are autonomous subjects *in here* looking at a world *out there*—what philosopher Daniel Dennett has christened the Cartesian Theater. King Milinda asks if there is an ultimate experiencer, knower, or soul (*vedagū*), which Nāgasena, in good debating style, promptly prods him to define. It is:

> a soul within that sees a visible form with the eye, hears a sound with the ear. . . . Just as we who are sitting here in the palace can look out of any window we want to look out of, even so, Revered Sir, this soul within can look out of any door it wants to (Mendis 1993, 47).

Isn't this how we feel? We are sitting in here watching what is out there? Nāgasena challenges this easy intuition by pointing out several problems with the analogy. I paraphrase:

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make the switch from essentialist thinking to population thinking is what made the theory of evolution through natural selection possible."

1. While the palace windows are interchangeable, we on the other hand typically require specific sense "doors" (i.e., sense faculties) to have specific kinds of cognition; that is, the eye cannot hear sounds, the ear cannot smell odors, and so forth.
2. In an actual palace we would see even better if the windows were simply removed, while we, by contrast, depend on the sense doors and could not cognize anything if they were removed. Either way, sense cognition depends on specific conditions to work properly.
3. In a real palace we can cognize what is both inside and outside the palace walls, but our sense perceptions are much more limited: for example, we can no longer taste food that is in our stomach.

Cognition, Nāgasena argues, is not performed by an autonomous, unitary inner experiencer *a là* the Upaniṣadic notion of Ātman (one of whose epithets is *bhoktṛ*, the "experiencer" or "enjoyer"). Rather, he refers to the dependent arising of our cognitive processes, which we will examine more thoroughly in the next chapter:

> Because of the eye and visible form, eye consciousness [etc.] arises. Coarising with that are contact, feeling, perception, volition [etc.] . . . these things are produced from a condition, and there is no experiencer found here (Mendis 1993, 49; modified).

In short, once we delineate the conditions necessary for cognitive processes to occur, there is no need to superimpose an ultimate experiencer onto them. The Cartesian Theater—the feeling that we are subjects "in here" looking at a world "out there"—may be intuitively persuasive, but it is based on the idea that our awareness exists independently, separate from the very conditions necessary for it to function in the first place—that is, after all, what *in-dependent* means.

Finally, Nāgasena uses a telling analogy to illustrate the dependent arising of our perceptual processes. The coming together of their conditions is like two hands clapping, he says:

> Suppose, Sire, two hands are clapped together. One of these hands should be understood as the eye, the other as visible form. The meeting of the two is contact (Mendis 1993, 51).

And, he continues, dependent upon contact, mental states such as feeling, perception, and volition arise. These processes occur as a function of the interaction between sense faculties and their respective stimuli, not by an autonomous subject or experiencer conceived as separate from such conditions. Needless to say, clapping is an interactive, temporal event.

Up to now, we've explored the early Buddhist worldview in general terms, through a series of analogies couched in ordinary language. These provided a gentle immersion into the Buddhist worldview, where we begin to lose so many common—and commonly reified—reference points: objects, selves, entities, worlds. But to better understand how identity can come about through complex interactive processes alone, we need to look at the formulations of dependent arising, and its specific terminology, with more precision and rigor.

2

Cognitive Processes in Early Buddhism

The Twelve Limbs of Dependent Arising

The formula of dependent arising is both succinct and rich in technical terms, the very terms Indian Buddhists will continue to use for analyzing mind well into the Yogācāra era. It depicts both the long-term process of rebirth and the short-term cognitive processes that perpetuate it—the two are closely intertwined. Although we find many variations of the formula in the early texts, the series with twelve limbs soon became standard. This is the version illustrated in the wheel of becoming (*bhava-cakra*) on monastic walls throughout Buddhist Asia.

In the *Sayings on Causes* (*Nidānavagga*), the second major division of his *Connected Discourses*, the Buddha presents this traditional series, describing the arising of our world of suffering, of *duḥkha*, which, when reversed, leads to its cessation. It is an analysis of the human problem as well as the path to its solution.

> And what, monks, is dependent arising? With ignorance as condition, karmic formations [come to be]; with karmic formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense spheres; with the six sense spheres as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, grasping; with grasping as condition, becoming; with becoming as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, monks, is called dependent arising (SN 12.1).

The presentations of dependent arising all emphasize that our phenomenal world, our world of dissatisfactory experience, is brought about not by any single cause but by the interaction among multiple factors occurring in discernable patterns. Early on the twelve limbs were organized into three categories, the same categories introduced above in the thought exercise around habit formation: (1) karmic action, (2) their results, and (3) the afflictive reactions these results typically elicit. This pattern occurs in both our moment-to-moment activities and, according to somewhat later interpretations, over the course of three separate lifetimes.

These specific terms were used throughout South Asian Buddhism with varying senses depending on context. They are defined in the *Connected Discourses* (SN 12.2) as follows:

1) *Ignorance* (*avidyā*)[27] is defined in terms of the four noble truths. This means not clearly recognizing the dissatisfaction and anxiety we continually experience, nor the causes and conditions by which they come about, nor the possibility of becoming free from them, nor the methods we might use to realize that freedom.

2) Ignorance is a condition for the arising of the *karmic formations* (*saṃskāra*). This complex term refers, in a general sense, to the diverse formations that both enable and enact our various bodily, verbal, and psychological activities. This refers to both the formative *activities* that give rise to different kinds of structures as well as to the *formations* formed by such actions, as in habit formation. This expresses the process-product bivalence we noted above in terms such as *painting* and *building* and is nicely captured in the psychological term *complex*. In the context of the five aggregates, it refers specifically to *intention* (*cetanā*), which effectively defines karma insofar as intentional actions plant the seeds for results to come to fruition in the future.

3) Karmic formations serve as the underlying conditions for the arising of *consciousness* (*vijñāna*). In the twelve limbs, *consciousness* typically refers to the stream of consciousness that persists from previous lives, "descends" into the fertilized zygote, and continues until it "exits" the body at death,

27. Although we are citing early Buddhist texts preserved in the Pāli language, we are using their parallel Sanskrit terms here to facilitate our transition in the next chapters to the later stages of Buddhism in India, whose texts were largely composed in Sanskrit.

which will later be called the *connecting consciousness* (*pratisandhi citta*). In the context of the five aggregates, however, *vijñāna* is cognitive awareness, an awareness of discrete objects.

The first two factors—ignorance and the karmic formations—denote the influences of *actions* from past lifetimes, while consciousness refers to the first *result* of those actions in this lifetime. These three factors also represent the initial round in the feedback relationship between *afflictive factors* (ignorance), the *actions* they influence (karmic formations), and the *results* they give rise to (consciousness).

4) With consciousness now enmeshed in material processes, the psychological and physiological components of human experience, called *name-and-form* (*nāmarūpa*), begin to develop, persisting throughout one's lifetime. *Form* refers to physiological processes (*rūpa*), while *name* refers to the psychological processes of feeling, apperception, intention, contact, and attention.[28]

5) Once our faculties begin forming, influenced by past actions, more cognitive and emotional processes occur. These begin when their respective objects impinge on the *six internal sense spheres* (*āyatana*): the five senses plus mind.

6) The meeting of these three—object, internal sense sphere, and consciousness—is *contact* (*sparśa*). These three constitute the basic cognitive process, with contact as its hub.

7) This is then experienced as a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral *feeling* or sensation (*vedanā*).

These five limbs, from consciousness through feeling, are considered *results* from past actions, which now evoke the afflictive factors that instigate more karma-creating activities.

8) A pleasant feeling tends to elicit *craving* or thirst (*tṛṣṇā*) for that object, while an unpleasant feeling elicits aversion.

9) Then, conditioned by craving, *grasping* or appropriation (*upādāna*) arises. We not only crave pleasurable experiences, we attempt to appropriate them, to take them as our own (the etymology of *appropriate*,

28. The exact status of *rūpa* in early Buddhism is still debated. While it is often treated simply as *matter*, contemporary specialists interpret it more experientially: *materiality* is the resistance (*patigha*) felt via the sense faculties. See, e.g., Hamilton 2000, 72.

ad + proprius). In the Buddhist view, it is our misguided attempts to hold onto and identify with transient experiences—sensual, emotional, and mental—that inevitably leads to anxiety and frustration. These futile efforts ramify throughout our lives, building up energy and inertia to act and think and feel in certain ways, deepening the ruts of our habitual activities. Craving and grasping are thus the dynamic core of these energetic processes. It is telling that *upādāna* also means a fuel supply that keeps an active process going.[29] Accordingly, grasping or appropriation is what links craving with the process of becoming.

10) *Becoming* (*bhava*), sometimes rendered as "being" or "existence," is defined as "renewed existence in the future" (AN 3.76).

11) Becoming marks the transition to another lifetime, where it conditions a new *birth* (*jāti*).

12) Birth is eventually followed by the next limb, *old age and death*, before starting all over again in the next life conditioned by ignorance and karmic formations.

This is the existential import of the basic Buddhist worldview: we are caught in a vicious cycle of compulsive behavioral patterns called *saṃsāra*—a set of entrenched habits enacted throughout our lives and persisting over multiple lifetimes—which we unwittingly perpetuate by attempting to grasp onto the ungraspable and identify with the unidentifiable.

The Dependent Arising of Self and World

Thus, in the early Buddhist view, we are not born blank slates. We come into life with various dispositions, tendencies, and the potential to experience the results of actions accumulated over countless past lives. These influence the development of our mind and body. As we have seen, when objects impinge upon our sense faculties and fresh moments of cognitive awareness

29. "Just as a fire burns with fuel (*upādāna*) but not without fuel, so Vaccha, I declare rebirth for one with fuel, not for one without fuel" (SN 44.9). *Upādāna* signifies the "fuel, supply, the material out of which anything is made," but also the "substratum by means of which an active process is kept alive or going" (PED, 149). It thus also means: grasping, attachment, drawing upon, finding one's support by, nourished by, taking up. In Yogācāra, *upādāna* becomes one of the conditions for *ālayavijñāna* to arise.

arise—that is, contact—the resulting sensations elicit craving and grasping, afflicted responses that fuel further actions. This entire process repeats itself over and over, building up and reinforcing our habitual tendencies, which over time become entrenched structures in much the same way that the repeated practice of sports, music, or meditation become etched into our muscle memory and neural networks. These are all *saṃskāras*, karmic formations formed by the formative processes of actions, results, and reactions.[30] Together these cycles constitute a constructive feedback process whereby the results of previous actions become the basis for succeeding ones.

And of course, we identify with all these: "I am my body, my thoughts, feelings, and sensations, my memories and plans, my special likes and dislikes," and so on. From this perspective, our identities, our sense of self, are just habits built up over time through the thoughts, feelings, and actions that occur over and over. Indeed, our sense of self is the most entrenched and pernicious habit of all.

It is liberating, Buddhists say, to see ourselves—our emotional, psychological, and physical lives—as processes in dynamic interaction with our environments. Analyzing our experiences in these terms, in terms of dependent arising, allows us to eventually see things *as they are* and become less attached to the thoughts, feelings, and things we identify with and grasp onto. The Buddha's disciple Ājñāta Kauṇḍinya was said to have attained the "stainless vision of the Dharma" on hearing that "Whatever is subject to origination is also subject to cessation" (SN 56.11).

This analysis is most pointedly directed toward our sense of self. We will begin this analysis with *mind*. The first verse of the *Dhammapada*, the popular early collection of sayings attributed to the Buddha, declares that:

> All states (*dhammā*) have mind (*mano*) as their forerunner, mind is their chief, and they are mind-made (Rahula 1959, 125).

30. This phrasing attempts to express the dynamism in the Pāli/Sanskrit term (composed of the prefix *sam-*, "together," and the root verb *kṛ*, "to do, make.") "Why do you say *saṅkhārā*? Because they create what is created; therefore they are called *saṅkhārā*." (Johansson 1979, 48, rendering SN 22.79).

A note on terminology: Mind, thought, and consciousness

We immediately face a problem of terminology and translation here. There are three different Sanskrit terms that are often translated as "mind" or near equivalents: *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*. Although these are often said to have the same meaning, they are used differently in different contexts.

Citta is derived from the verbal root *cit*, "to think," and hence sometimes means *thought*, as well as that which thinks the thought—that is, *mind*. On the other hand, it also often connotes "the center and focus of man's emotional nature" (PED, 266). As such, *citta* refers to the heart, which is where people throughout Buddhist Asia point to when asked where *citta* is located. From early on it was translated into Chinese as *heart* 心. (It does not, though, refer to the organ, which is *hṛdaya*). These emotional connotations are not fully captured by the English word *mind*, which sounds too rational and reified.

Manas (or *mano*) is more explicitly rational and is often translated as "mind," "thought," or "mentation." *Manas* in some contexts also refers to the mental *faculty* whose objects or contents are ideas or concepts.

The last term, *vijñāna*, which we encountered above, is also multivalent. Its distinct meanings and functions vary considerably by context. It is typically translated as "consciousness," but in some contexts "cognitive awareness" is more precise. *Vijñāna* as *consciousness* refers to the sentience that is said to persist from one life to the next as long as one remains in the cycle of rebirth. As such, it has been referred to as "saṃsāric *vijñāna*."[31] *Vijñāna* as *cognitive awareness* is associated with our perceptual or cognitive processes. There are six kinds of cognitive awareness, which occur when the appropriate stimuli impinge upon their respective faculties, the five sense faculties plus mind. These stimuli—sights, sounds, and so forth—are their cognitive objects. *Cognitive awareness* is always associated with discrete objects, whose characteristics (*ākāra*) it reflects. This distinguishes it from objectless forms of awareness.

The cognitive process

The noun *mind* is an easy, and perhaps unavoidable, shorthand to refer to multiple cognitive or mental processes. But we need to be careful not to

31. Wijesekera 1964.

reify it—treating dynamic processes as if they were static things. The early Buddhists sidestep our tendencies toward reification by analyzing how phenomena occur in dependence on causes and conditions.

First, the arising of cognitive awareness is typically analyzed as follows, taking visual awareness as the model for the other forms of cognitive awareness:

> Dependent upon the eye and visible form, visual awareness arises (SN 12.44).

Let's look at this closely. Cognitive awareness here is not a faculty that acts. It is an event, a process that occurs in dependence on certain conditions. As the Buddha said, "Apart from conditions, there is no arising of cognitive awareness" (MN 38.5). Like Milinda's example of two hands clapping, cognitive awareness occurs when there is *contact*, when an object impinges upon its respective sense faculty. As an early discourse put it:

> The six internal sense spheres are one end, the six external sense spheres are the other end, consciousness is in the middle (Ñāṇananda 2007, 31; AN 3.61).

The early texts typically define *contact* not as a strictly sequential process but as a single event: contact is the meeting of the three—eye, visible form, and visual awareness. In other words, analysis of cognitive processes in terms of dependent arising identifies *patterns of interaction*, neither agents nor objects by themselves. Cognition is like a transaction, an event that requires two "ends," a buyer and a seller, and something—consciousness—in between. It is the *relationship* that defines them: "The meeting of the three is contact" (SN 12.44).

Moreover, although that moment of cognitive awareness arises in dependence on something impinging upon its respective sense faculty, that "something" only becomes an object if we are aware of it. An *object* is effectively defined as that which gives rise to cognitive awareness.[32]

32. It is telling that the term *object* in English derives from the medieval Latin *objectum*, "thing presented to the mind." That is, it is *objectified* by the act of awareness.

All this is remarkably similar to scientific analyses of color cognition, as Lakoff and Johnson describe it:

> Color concepts are "interactional"; they arise from the interactions of our bodies, our brains, the reflective properties of objects, and electromagnetic radiation. Colors are not objective; there is in the grass or the sky no greenness or blueness independent of retinas, color cones, neural circuitry, and brains. Nor are colors purely subjective; they are neither a figment of our imaginations nor spontaneous creations of our brains. . . . Color is a function of the world and our biology interacting (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 24).

Our ordinary perceptions are thus neither purely objective, an exact mirror of nature that accurately reflects things "just as they are," nor purely subjective, mere projections or superimpositions of our own categories. Rather, in both early Buddhism and cognitive science, cognition occurs with the interaction between a sense organ and its correlative stimulus.

This interactive view is a very different way, a radically ecological way, of understanding our being in the world, where relational process is primary and basic, and ontological separation is secondary and contrived. It is easy to overlook the significance of this perspective because it runs so counter to our deeply implicit sense that we are independently existing subjects that encounter independently existing objects and only then cognize them—the Cartesian Theater. It is important to keep these early analyses in mind when we examine Yogācāra views, which similarly argue that the subject and object are only known—are only sensible—in relation to each other.

Much the same can be said for the *existence of the objects*. Only appropriate stimuli give rise to moments of cognitive awareness, and what is *appropriate* depends on what our sense faculties are capable of responding to. Human ears do not respond to the same pitches, and so do not hear the same sounds, that dogs or bats or whales do, nor can we see the same things the birds and the bees do; our faculties are structured differently. It is, therefore, not just the "objects" that determine the content of our awareness; our sensory faculties determine what *counts* as an object.[33] It is the respon-

33. Biological philosopher Susan Oyama (2000, 38) makes a similar point: "The impact of

sive structure of our sense faculties that determine our *cognitive domains* (*gocara*)[34]—what counts as visible objects, audible sounds, tangible things, and so forth. Like two hands clapping, objects and faculties are defined in terms of each other.

Awareness of a world

These analyses are extended to the entire world, which in early Buddhist usage does not refer to something existing independently of ourselves but to the total context of our saṃsāric lives. The term *world* (*loka*)[35] is defined experientially, in terms of dependent arising.

> And what, monks, is the origin of the world? In dependence on the eye and forms, visual consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [arises] . . . craving . . . grasping . . . becoming . . . birth; with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. This, monks, is the origin of the world (SN 12.44).

Here, too, we often unreflectively take the term *world* as referring to something outside ourselves. But this already *presupposes* the Cartesian Theater. An analysis of our experience in terms of dependent arising suggests, on the contrary, that there is no way to absolutely separate the components of our perceptions, since *we only know them* insofar as they arise together, mutually dependent on each other.

Our experience of the world is thus necessarily and unavoidably mediated through our minds and bodies. If we have no direct access to the world

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sensory stimuli is a joint function of the stimuli and the sensing organism; the 'effective stimulus' is defined by the organism that is affected by it."

34. We borrow the term "cognitive domain" from biological philosophers Maturana and Varela because it is both a close translation of *gocara*—*go* means "cow," *cara* is "walking," hence a cow's *range*—and an appropriate interpretation of its meaning: "the domain of classes of interactions into which an organism can enter constitutes its entire cognitive reality" (Maturana and Varela 1980, 10).

35. See Collins 1982, 43–45, for the early Vedic sense of *loka* as a multidimensional *world* constructed by human action (karma), particularly ritual action. See also Gonda 1996 and Patton 2005.

independent of our ongoing experience, then—like our cognitive objects—what constitutes the world or environment[36] for any organism also depends upon the structures of its faculties. It is these that determine its range of experience, its effective cognitive domain.

This perspective involves the same kind of inversion we saw between subject and object above: it is not so much the world that determines the perceptions of an organism but the perceptual capacities of the organism that determine its world, its environment. As Capra concludes (1996, 267), echoing Maturana and Varela, "Cognition, then, is not a representation of an independently existing world, but rather a continual *bringing forth of a world*" through the process of interaction.[37] "This, monks, is the origin of the world."

Here, too, this view is neither realism nor idealism: cognitive awareness is a process that arises conditioned by *both* sense organs and sense objects—by two hands clapping, not just one.[38] In his study of Pāli texts, Rune Johansson (1979, 28) therefore concludes that in early Buddhism:

> The world is a dynamic process, constantly being produced and deliberately constructed by our senses, our thoughts, and our desires. . . . This does not mean that we and the world are unreal

36. As the geneticist Richard Lewontin points out, "An environment is something that surrounds or encircles, but for there to be a surrounding there must be something at the center to be surrounded. The environment of an organism is the penumbra of external conditions that are relevant to it because it has effective interactions with those aspects of the outer world" (Lewontin 2000, 48). That is, "Just as there can be no organism without an environment, so there can be no environment without an organism" (Lewontin 1983, cited in Varela et al. 1991, 198).

37. In some strands of biological thinking, an organism's "world" is similarly defined by what it responds to: "Living organisms respond to only a small fraction of the stimuli impinging on them. . . . In this way each living system builds up its own distinctive world according to its own distinctive structure. . . . The range of interactions a living system can have with its environment defines its 'cognitive domain.' . . . [C]ognition is not a representation of an independent, pre-given world, but rather a bringing forth of a world. . . . not *the* world, but *a* world, one that is always dependent upon the organism's structure. Since individual organisms within a species have more or less the same structure, they bring forth similar worlds" (Capra 1996, 269).

38. Cognitive scientist Eleanor Rosch (1999, 72) concurs: "The subjective and objective aspects of concepts and categories arise together as different poles of the same act of cognition and are part of the same informational field."

> or a mere illusion. The objects are there but our perceptions of them are constituent and essential parts of them . . . the cleavage into "objective" and "subjective" was never made; the subjective process of image-formation was thought to be part of the object itself.

Again, this is arguably not how most of us experience ourselves or the world. Most people report at least the feeling of being separate and independent. In the early Buddhist perspective, the problem is that we accept this innate sense of separateness as a given, taking this unexamined intuition as the *basis* of analyzing our experience rather than as the *object* of that analysis. And it is this deep sense that we are separate from the world, that we can hold onto something that is truly and permanently *ours*, that leads to frustration, futility, and suffering. Thus the Buddha describes the arising and passing away of the *world* in the very same terms as the arising and passing away of suffering: in terms of the four noble truths:

> In this fathom-long body, with its perception and thoughts, I proclaim the world to be, likewise the origin of the world and the cessation of the world, likewise the method leading to the cessation of the world (AN 4.45).

Taken together, these three points—that cognitive awareness is a process that occurs, that objects are necessarily correlative with their respective faculties, and that the world we experience through these processes only arises interactively—serve to undermine our deep and intuitive sense that we are autonomous subjects enjoying direct and unproblematic perception of external objects. Our Yogācārins will build upon and develop these themes many centuries later.

How Objects Are Constructed

We have mentioned our deep sense that perceptual objects are *out there*. But what role do our own cognitive processes play in this? From what we have seen, we are only aware of stimuli insofar as they are impinging on a specific sense faculty or mind; in a sense, this defines their experiential *reality*.

Outside of these interactions, we have no knowledge of them. This may seem counterintuitive, but we all readily recognize, and robustly respond to, objects that we know are nothing but pixels flashing on a screen. How is this similar?

In early Buddhist analyses, perception involves two distinct processes: one deconstructive and one constructive. These dual cognitive processes are expressed by two terms: *vijñāna* and *saṃjñā*. We see the deconstructive, or disjunctive, aspect in the term *vijñāna*, in the sense of cognitive awareness. *Vijñāna* is comprised of the prefix *vi-*, meaning "division, distinction, separation," together with the root *jñā*, "to know, cognize, be aware of," cognate with English words *know* and *gnosis*. *Vi-* highlights that this awareness is elicited by contrast or change. That is, our sense faculties only operate when there is some shift in stimuli: we only notice a perfectly camouflaged insect when it starts moving, or the hum of a refrigerator or the flutter of a fluorescent light when they start or stop. The sense that visual objects are stable or permanent is fostered by the continuous reception of light waves on our retinal cells, much as the continual refreshing of a television or computer screen provides the impression of enduring objects.

So, if our knowledge of apparently independent objects depends on nothing but evanescent flashings on the screen of our visual faculties, how do we come to see and recognize discrete, coherent objects, the meaningful sights and sounds all around us? This is accomplished, in both the early Buddhist view and in contemporary cognitive science, by the *constructive* processes that bring these disparate, fluctuating stimuli together into coherent experience.

We experience things as enduring, coherent wholes by means of several integrated processes: feeling (*vedanā*), apperception (*saṃjñā*), and cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*). As Śāriputra, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, notes in an early discourse, these processes are closely intertwined:

> Feeling, apperception, and cognitive awareness—these factors are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognizes (MN 43.9).

In other words, our experiences come about through a variety of processes that cannot be distinguished experientially.

As the passage notes, discerning cognitive awareness is always accompanied by apperception—a re-cognition or "knowing together" (*saṃ-jñā*; the prefix *saṃ* is cognate with Latin *con*), a process that associates a present stimulus with previous knowledge or experience. To illustrate this, cognitive scientist Lisa Feldman Barrett showed a reporter an unidentifiable "grainy black-and-white mishmash on the screen," which was subsequently shown to be "a close-up of a bee's body."

> "Now," Barrett said, "can you *not* see the bee? Every time you see this, you will always see the bee. Because right now your mind is adding information from your past experience to create the image of the bee" (Fischer 2013).

Apperception is defined as the apprehension of a distinctive characteristic, mark, or sign (*lakṣaṇa* or *nimitta*) and typically exemplified in terms of color categories: "it perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, and it perceives white" (MN 43.8). Recognizing specific, discrete objects or qualities, in other words, always involves categories: seeing a red ball entails recognizing it both as "red" and as "a ball." In short, early Buddhists saw that both disjunctive and synthetic cognitive processes occur in nearly every perceptual event.[39]

The features we consciously perceive are never objective *raw data* in another, even more fundamental sense: our sense organs are triggered by stimuli in specific ways. We do not choose to see bright or dark light, or to feel things as hot or cold; these proto-categories, as it were, are determined by the structure of our organs.

Therefore the distinctive features we perceive neither occur in complete isolation from each other, for they are necessarily distinguished contrastively (*vijñāna*); nor do they correspond to some *pure sensation*, since they are the end result—the product as much as the cause—of a series of

39. This agrees with the observation of neurologist Oliver Sacks (2004, 85) that "whether it is color or motion, a double process of breaking down and building up, or decomposition and recomposition—whatever one likes to call it—seems to be unavoidable."

complex, constructive cognitive processes (*saṃjñā*).[40] In this sense, all of our conscious perceptions have been *preformed*, both by the distinctions and categories our cognitive faculties are structured to respond to and by the constructive processes that actively interpret them—that is, *vijñāna* and *saṃjñā* together, which are "conjoined, not disjoined."[41]

Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 18; emphasis added) declare that,

> categorization is a consequence of how we are embodied. . . . We categorize as we do because we have the brains and bodies we have and because we interact in the world the way we do . . . *the categories we form are part of our experience*. . . . Categorization is thus not a purely intellectual matter, occurring after the fact of experience. Rather, the formation and use of categories is the stuff of experience.

Categorizing and classifying are necessary for organizing our sundry sensations into forms we can comprehend, both sensorially and conceptually. All our perceptions, in short, are already constructs. This is simply how our faculties function. While the map may not be the territory, our *experienced world* is unavoidably a mapped world.

40. This too is similar to findings in cognitive science, but cognitive scientist Christine Skarda (1999, 79; emphasis added) cautions that while "All *perceived* features and objects are the *products* not the causes of perceptual processing . . . rejection of naïve realism *does not imply . . . a form of subjectivism*, for it does not claim that the perception is merely subjective. Subjectivism violates the principle . . . that all phenomena (whether physical or mental) are inexorably *embedded in a causal network*."

41. According to Skarda (1999, 85), the receptor neurons of the sense organs are "stimulus-specific in terms of their response characteristics. Each responds maximally (i.e., with a burst of intense electrical activity) to a specific type or class of stimuli," such as certain wavelengths or intensities of light, temperature, sound, and so on. Even putatively "pure sensations" depend upon the elementary schemas that constitute the responsive structure of the sense organs. These receptor neurons "isolate their triggering stimuli," which are then contrasted with each other by "post-receptor" neurons that "deal with the phenomenal event occurring within the sense organ *at one remove*, as it were," eventually giving rise to the perceived features we consciously experience. "The color red, for example, acquires its character because (1) a particular wavelength of light is isolated and (2) is then contrasted within the visual system with the wavelength of light that humans perceive as green (rather than yellow or blue)."

Mere Perception in the Pāli Texts

This is the conclusion that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2007, 14) has reached based solely on early Buddhist analyses of cognition. In terms that adumbrate the Yogācāra teachings many centuries later, he argues that if all our perceptions are already constructs, then we cannot definitively distinguish our perceptions from their apparent "objects," the map from the territory, for the two are—at least experientially—indistinguishable. It is not so much that "Sense perception at all levels relies largely on signs," but that,

> as the Suttas often make it clear, all percepts *as such* are to be regarded as mere signs (*saññā, nimitta*). Hence, while the worldling says that he perceives "things" with the help of signs, the Tathāgata says that all we perceive are mere signs (Ñāṇananda 2007, 15).

As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda explains, "the Pāli word *saññā* (Skt. *saṃjñā*) denotes perception as well as 'sign,' 'symbol,' 'mark,' or 'token'" (14). When considered as the object or content of mental awareness, *saṃjñā* is more like an "idea" or "notion." So "perception, sign, and notion" are different ways of considering the same cognitive content.

More importantly, he continues, these signs and their characteristics (*nimitta*) are significant to us not because they seem to exist objectively but because they elicit emotional responses. That is, lust, hatred, and delusion—the key afflictions referred to as the *three poisons*—are the cause of these "signifying" characteristics (*nimittakaraṇa*), not the other way around. He cites one of the early discourses:

> Lust, friends, is something significative, hatred is something significative, delusion is something significative (MN 43.36).

Venerable Ñāṇananda explains this as follows:

> The "objects" of sense which we grasp and recognize as existing out there, derive their object status from their impact or evocative power. . . . Sense objects are therefore *signs* which have

> become *significant* in themselves owing to our ignorance that their significance depends on the psychological mainsprings of lust, hatred, and delusion (Ñāṇananda 2007, 16, emphasis added. See also Johansson 1979, 50).

That is, they become objects insofar as we remain enthralled to the three poisons. Conversely, these "objectifying" processes can be undone on the path to awakening. In terms that similarly adumbrate Yogācāra positions, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda describes the constructive as well as deconstructive aspects of this world building:

> The world is what our senses present it [to] us to be. . . . However, the world is not purely a projection of the mind in the sense of a thoroughgoing idealism; it is a phenomenon which the empirical consciousness cannot get behind, as it is itself committed to it. One might, of course, transcend the empirical consciousness and see the world objectively in the light of *paññā* [wisdom] only to find that it is void (*suñña*) of the very characteristics which make it a "world" for oneself (Ñāṇananda 1971, 84).

How Subjects Are Constructed

Just as constructed objects constitute one pole of our mapped world, our deep sense of subjectivity constitutes the other. This occurs with the advent of more reflexive forms of awareness deeply influenced by language. In classical Buddhist analyses these are closely associated with the sixth cognitive mode: mental awareness (*manovijñāna*). Like the five forms of sensory consciousness discussed above, mental awareness arises in dependence on specific conditions: when one of two distinct types of stimuli impinge on the mental faculty (*manas*).

First, when a sensory awareness arises, it is usually immediately followed by an awareness *of* that awareness, an awareness *that* such and such a sensory awareness has occurred.[42] This reflexivity is closely related to the second type of stimuli for mental awareness: nonsensory objects such as thoughts,

42. "Now these five faculties, each having a separate field, a separate domain, not experi-

reflections, or ideas. We are not only aware that we are seeing or hearing—a kind of reflexive awareness—we can also reflect upon it discursively through language and concepts. Processes of thought and reflection were considered formations of speech in early India, closely associated with the mental faculty.[43] In sum, what characterizes mental awareness, in relation to ordinary sensory awareness as well as to language-dependent mental processes, is its self-awareness, its reflexivity.

This does not mean that mind is an agent that "cognizes itself." Mental awareness no more actively *cognizes* thoughts than sensory awareness actively *perceives* objects, since neither of them are agents nor, strictly speaking, actions. In the impersonal causal syntax of dependent arising, cognitive awareness does not actively cognize anything; it simply *is* the awareness that occurs when requisite conditions come together. Failure to appreciate this—to interpret consciousness as an act rather than an event, as akin to watching rather than seeing—is to miss the most distinctive feature of early Buddhist thought: its analysis of experience without an underlying subject. For if awareness is not an act that one performs but an event that occurs, then there is no need, indeed no place, for either an active agent or a substantive subject. Like other forms of awareness, mental awareness simply occurs when the requisite conditions are present. As the Buddha emphasizes:

> In dependence on the mind and mental phenomena, mental awareness arises. The mind is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise; mental phenomena are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise (SN 35.93).

Nor is mental awareness a "witness" that stands apart from and observes the cognitive processes themselves. It is simply a reflexive function in

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encing each other's field and domain, have mind as their resort, and mind experiences their fields and domains" (MN 43.21, as rendered in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, 391).

43. P. *vitakka-vicāra vacīsaṅkhārā*, MN 44.15. *Sutta Nipāta* 834 speaks of considering viewpoints in the *manas* (*manasā diṭṭhigatāni cintayanto*) and SN 10.3 of the "thoughts of *mano*" (*manovitakkā*) (Johansson 1965, 183 and 186). Reat 1990, 305: "Language was thought of as a discovery of the inherent conceptual relationships among things, so that from a very early period in Indian thought, conceptualization was regarded as primarily a verbal phenomenon."

which the sensory processes of one part of the system—the five forms of sensory awareness—become the *cognitive domain* of another part—the sixth form of cognitive awareness. This is like the variegated nervous systems in complex organisms, which provide information about different aspects of their own metabolic processes—body temperature, blood sugar, oxygen levels, and so forth—as well as ongoing feedback mechanisms that regulate them. These monitoring processes are generated within the system itself; they are not independent agents standing above or apart from those processes.

Mind then does not refer to some singular, unitary, unchanging entity. In the early Buddhist analysis, it refers to a complex set of processes to which, "to cut a long story short," we give the label "mind." Such conventional designations are, however, deeply enchanting—enough to make us think they "exist."

Language and subjectivity

For humans, our sense of self is deeply influenced by the kind of recursive, reflexive awareness that language facilitates. This sense of *internality* begins when mental awareness arises in relation to a previous occurrence of sensory awareness—that is, when we are aware that we are seeing or hearing. This can also be a response to stimuli occurring within the organism, like pain or thirst. The reflexivity of mental awareness, however, amplifies this internal domain—and it is still just a cognitive domain—by fostering conceptual and linguistic discursiveness. These two together—awareness *that* we are seeing, thirsting, and so on, along with runaway thoughts *about* it—provide the conditions for our complex, innate, and seemingly independent sense of self.[44]

This follows from the basic approach of dependent arising presented above. First, not only are our sense faculties stimulus-specific, but our perceptions only appear in ways enabled by our faculties: we only see visible colors, hear audible sounds, touch tangible objects, and so forth. As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda emphasizes, what appear as external objects are "mere

44. "At a certain level of complexity," Capra (1996, 270) observes, "a living organism . . . brings forth not only an external but also an inner world . . . linked intimately to language, thought, and consciousness."

signs" (*saññā*)—neither purely subjective nor wholly objective, they are "a function of the world and our biology interacting" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 25).

Similarly, objects of mental awareness, such as thoughts and ideas, only appear in ways that are *correlative with the structures* of our minds—that is, with our embodied categorizations. For example, based on past experience we have learned the categories "red" and "ball." So we are now able to perceive a "red ball" in ways that neither newborn babies can, since they have not previously experienced balls, nor flies or frogs can, since they have no such categories. They cannot conceive what is inconceivable to them.

The category "ball," however, reflects more than sensory perception; it also involves linguistic categorization. It is an object used for specific purposes and referred to by a name, a designation. Most of what we perceive in our human cognitive domains are like this; they are not simply sensory; they are also categorical and linguistic, and hence social and cultural.

Recall that the sixth form of cognitive awareness, mental awareness, is closely related to language and concepts. The early Buddhist understanding of our sense of self, and some of the problems it raises, lies in the complex relations between this sixth form of awareness and the role of language in ordinary perception. This is succinctly expressed in a process the Buddha describes that most of us have experienced. It begins with the standard formula of dependent arising but takes a new tack:

> Dependent on the eye and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one proliferates. Depending on what one has proliferated as the source, one is then plagued by further perceptions and notions tinged by proliferation in regard to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye [and so on, up to] mind objects cognizable through the mind (MN 18.16).

That is, contact occurs when a visible form impinges on the eye and visual awareness arises. This gives rise to a sensation or feeling as one perceives that form. This then evokes certain thoughts, which evoke yet other thoughts,

and so on—a discursive process called *proliferation* (*prapañca*). Once this begins, it evokes yet further perceptions and notions about other objects or ideas, past, present, or future. This results in the runaway chatter that characterizes so much of our waking consciousness. Again, none of these analyses refer to nor require a substantive agent standing above or behind everything directing the action.

How is this discursiveness connected to our sense of self and our self-focused anxieties, our "woulda, shoulda, coulda"? By detaching awareness from direct sensory experience, language facilitates abstract thinking. We are able to conceive of things not currently present to our senses: to remember past experiences, plan future events, even imagine alternatives to what we are presently experiencing. We are also, thereby, able to conceive of ourselves as a singular locus of experience, a reified self that seems to persist from remembered pasts into imagined futures. This helps us make a contrast between, on the one hand, our *internal* awareness, based on relatively stable bodily sensations, and, on the other, the shifting, apparently *external* stimuli that instigate transient forms of awareness.[45] Ironically, these contrasts depend upon contextual and temporal distinctions that belie the independence they appear to affirm. Indeed, such reifications are the very definition of the permanent self that Indian Buddhists reject:

> It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity (MN 2.8).

Insofar as our human sense of self involves linguistic reference, along with the reflexivity this entails, this "self" is abstract, reified, and disembodied, more a function of our social and conceptual capacities than a referent of some objective "thing." Hence, our deep sense of personal identity is fundamentally misleading; it is, in a word, *illusory*. We can't hold onto it or grasp it or protect it, since it is not a thing but a construct, a linguistic fiction. In Buddhist terms, it is the conceit "I am."

45. This is similar to how neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes perception (2000, 67–68).

In the early texts, "I am" (*asmīti*) is nearly always expressed as direct speech (marked by *iti*), reflecting its character as a linguistic utterance rather than an objective entity. This process enables not only our useful ability to reflect upon what is happening in our own minds but also our distressing inability to stop ruminating about ourselves. In short, it engenders our endless runaway thoughts and feelings. The conceit "I am" thus appears not as some simple, albeit abstract, referent *of* language but as a complex byproduct of the reflexivity entailed *by* language. And these processes become—for most of us most of the time—habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. And as with all habits, we are effectively bound by them.

In the early Buddhist view, the most deeply entrenched object of these habits is precisely this reflexive sense of identity, the view that we are or have an unchanging, enduring self. As one text declares, the notion "'I am' is a proliferation; 'I am this' is a proliferation; 'I shall be' is a proliferation" (SN 35.248). And this in turn generates its own runaway patterns. As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (1986, 11) notes, citing an early text called the *Suttanipāta*, not only is the label "I" an outcome of *prapañca*, but the thought "I am" is also the root of further proliferation.

How does this sense of identity come about? In the endless ways we identify with and "take as our own" the five *aggregates subject to clinging* (*upādāna-skandha*), the basic processes that constitute our human existence: I identify with my body and all its familiar quirks, the sensations I feel after a good workout, the perception of things comforting and novel, my psychological complexes for better or worse, and finally, my sheer awareness of things—the most fundamental reality I imagine. The Buddha describes the arising of this *identity view* (*satkāyadṛṣṭi*) in just these terms:

> Here, monk, the uninstructed worldling . . . unskilled and undisciplined in their Dharma, regards material form as self, or self as possessing material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. He regards feeling as self . . . perception as self . . . volitional formations as self . . . consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how identity view comes to be (SN 22.82).

We are all subject to the wandering stream of thoughts about ourselves, our bodies, our feelings, our actions, our thoughts about these thoughts. We wonder endlessly:

> Touched by the sensation born of contact with ignorance, there comes to the untrained ordinary man the view "I am," there come the views "I am this," "I shall be," "I shall not be," "I shall have a body (*rūpa*)," "I shall be bodiless," "I shall be ideating," "I shall be free from unconscious ideation (*saṃjñā*)," "I shall neither have nor be without ideas" (SN 22.47; cited in Johansson 1979, 267).

In short, this self-identity is not found in any of the five aggregates because this "I" is not some "thing" that "exists" some "where." This conceit "I am" is itself just another proliferation, an endlessly receding cipher whose sole reality consists of its influences upon the hearts and minds, the thoughts and deeds, of symbol-sharing beings such as ourselves. And it is our compulsive attempts to grasp onto this insubstantial will-o'-the wisp that keeps us running in circles.

Unconscious Habitual Tendencies

Unfortunately, grasping to self-identity is more deep-seated—and intractable—than we usually appreciate. This is because our behavioral patterns are informed and driven by nonconscious *latent tendencies* (*anuśaya*),[46] especially toward the conceit "I am." As fleeting and bereft of substance as they may be, these tendencies lie ever ready to trigger our habitual behaviors. An early passage summarizes this:

> The latent tendency to lust underlies pleasant feeling. The latent tendency to aversion underlies unpleasant feeling. The latent

46. The Sanskrit term *anuśaya*, cognate with the Pāli *anusaya*, is composed of the prefix *anu-*, "along, follow behind," and the root *śi*, meaning "to lie down, to sleep, to dwell." The verbal form *anuśeti* (P. *anuseti*) thus means "to lie down with, to dwell on." When referring to ideas it means "to fill the mind persistently, to lie dormant and be continually cropping up." This is close to the nominal form most prevalent in Buddhist texts, *anusaya*, which the *Pali-English Dictionary* (44) defines as: "Bent, bias, proclivity, the persistence of a dormant or latent disposition, predisposition, tendency. Always in bad sense."

> tendency to ignorance underlies neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling (MN 44.25).

In other words, we are predisposed to respond to specific sensations in specific ways:

> Monks, dependent on the eye and forms, visual awareness arises; the meeting of the three is contact; with contact as condition there arises [a feeling] felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant. When one is touched by a pleasant feeling, if one delights in it, welcomes it, and remains holding to it, then the latent tendency to lust lies within one (MN 148.28).

The text then makes the same point about the latent tendencies toward aversion and ignorance.

These predispositions refer to the tendency for us to respond to specific kinds of sensations with desire, aversion, or ignorance. When the aroma of coffee hits my olfactory glands, for example, my nervous system perks up and instigates action, perpetuating my long-term coffee habit. And since sensations of one kind or another occur in nearly all conscious experiences, they are continuously evoking our reactive tendencies and provoking further actions. Long before these patterns were systematically exploited by the advertising industry, humans have been assailed by the ceaseless stimuli of our senses and the reactions they trigger.

In the early Buddhist view, these patterns are not limited to this lifetime, for the processes driving these compulsive behaviors are the same ones driving rebirth. These tendencies, including the conceit "I am," are said to be innate, in the literal sense of being *in-born*. So, the Buddha declares:

> A young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion "identity," so how could a view of identity arise in him? Yet the latent tendency to a view of identity lies within him (MN 64.3).[47]

47. This is one in a list of habitual tendencies—doubt about the teachings, sensual desire, ill will toward others, and so on—that this discourse treats in the same fashion.

As we grow up and fall from this Edenic innocence, the situation slowly changes. These innate tendencies develop so that we typically "abide with a mind obsessed and enslaved by the view of identity," which, "habituated and uneradicated," serves as a fetter that ties us to this world (MN 64.5), becoming, as the early texts put it, the "basis for the maintenance of consciousness . . . the descent of name-and-form," and so on (SN 12.39). In short, this tendency persists *as long as we remain in saṃsāra*, until it is gradually eliminated along the path and only fully eradicated upon final liberation.

Liberation from our compulsive behavioral patterns (*saṃsāra*) is not only said to be impossible without abandoning these latent tendencies—especially the conceit "I am"—(MN 148.28), it is effectively *defined* as the elimination of our tendencies toward desire, aversion, and ignorance—not merely at the conscious level but at the deeper, more entrenched level of our unconscious dispositions (MN 9.8).

> With what manner of insight, and not grasping anything in this world, does a monk realize nibbāna? Let him completely cut off the root of concepts tinged with the prolific tendency [*prapañca*], namely, the notion "I am the thinker."[48]

It is precisely this conceit "I am," this tendency to grasp onto a sense of separate identity, that is the most deep-seated and difficult to eradicate. After the five lower fetters—identity view, doubt, grasping to rules and rituals, sensual desire, and ill will—have all disappeared, nevertheless "there lingers in him a residual conceit 'I am,' the desire 'I am,' the latent tendency 'I am' that has not yet been uprooted" (SN 22.89).

How can this be uprooted? We can stop our endless preoccupation with self-identity, the tradition declares, if we see it as the construction it is:

> The learned monk well practiced in the Buddha's teaching and well trained in meditation does not abide with a mind obsessed and enslaved by identity view; he understands as it actually is the escape from the identity view that has arisen, and the identity

48. *Suttanipāta*, vv. 915–16; translated in Ñāṇananda 1971, 34.

view together with the latent tendency to it[49] is abandoned in him (MN 64.6; modified).

Seeing through the Magic Show

Suppose, monks, a magician or a magician's apprentice should hold a magic show at the four crossroads; and a keen-sighted man should see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it radically. Even as he sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it radically, he would find it empty, he would find it hollow, he would find it void of essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a magic show?

Even so, monks, whatever consciousness—be it past, future, or present, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a monk sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it radically. And even as he sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it radically, he would find it empty, he would find it hollow, he would find it void of essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a consciousness ? . . .

Form is like a mass of foam
and feeling—but an airy bubble.
Perception is like a mirage
and formations a plantain tree.
Consciousness is a magic show,
a juggler's trick entire. (Ñāṇananda 2007, 5)

In the early Buddhist view, the causes of dissatisfaction and mis-knowing can be observed and eventually dissolved through mindful observation and analysis of our compulsive behavioral patterns as outlined in the formula of dependent arising. The reason we suffer from dissatisfaction and anxiety is because we identify with the impermanent processes that constitute our lives—our bodies, feelings, perceptions, karmic formations, and

49. The persistence of the conceit "I am" until so far along the path to liberation raised questions that would come to challenge later Buddhist analyses of mind, as we will see in the next chapter.

awareness—and attempt to secure stable, unchanging selves in a world of change and instability. These misguided actions need to be replaced by those more appropriate to a world characterized by impermanence, the lack of essential self, and the inability of impermanent and selfless objects to secure lasting satisfaction.

In short, the prognosis, the path to healing, correlates with the diagnosis—by discerning and addressing the causes of those ills. If the problem the Buddha addressed concerns our self-obsessed runaway thoughts and the feelings and actions they instigate, then the solution is appropriately directed toward training our minds, calming those feelings, and rectifying those actions. The fourth noble truth, consisting of the eightfold path, is thus summarized into the *three trainings*: developing moral behavior, stabilizing our attention, and cultivating insight or wisdom. Like the formula of dependent arising, these three constitute a feedback process: moral behavior provides the stability needed for the attention to be focused, which can then be harnessed to cultivate deeper insight and wisdom. Insight in turn helps us more deeply understand the motives and consequences of our behavior, which enhances the mental and emotional stability necessary for cultivating that insight, and so on.

More specifically, the training of moral behavior consists of appropriate speech, action, and livelihood, which are facilitated by appropriate effort and mindfulness. Based on these, one cultivates deep states of concentration, which become the basis for cultivating both appropriate view—seeing reality "as it truly is"—and appropriate intention, which are oriented toward liberation and compassion toward others. In the standard presentation of the *eightfold path*, appropriate view and intention are listed first, since they are necessary for intentionally orienting us toward moral behavior and stable attention.

Buddhist meditation

Cultivating insight through meditation is thus crucial for liberation. Though the early Buddhists practiced various kinds of meditation, we will only discuss the practice of mindfulness, as it closely correlates with the analysis of suffering (*duḥkha*) in terms of dependent arising.

In this view, only deep penetrating insight frees us from false views, and the attachments and habits they foster. Without seeing clearly that sensual

pleasures do not bring an end to anxiety and dis-ease, we crave and cling to the same things again and again. But our restless, hungry feeling returns as soon as the pleasant sensations end, and instead of being satisfied, we are left with the physiological as well as psychological consequences of craving—for we have now strengthened a habit. It is like taking the wrong medicine for an illness, not getting cured, but still suffering its side effects—and becoming addicted in the process.

We can break these patterns by clearly comprehending the relationship between our actions and their consequences and changing our habitual behaviors accordingly. To accomplish this, we need to overcome the obstacles that prevent us from concentrating and analyzing them dispassionately. The *Discourse on the Foundation of Mindfulness* (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*), the *locus classicus* of this practice, shows how to examine these obstacles in the detached impersonal mode of dependent arising:

> And how, monks, does a monk dwell contemplating phenomena in terms of the five hindrances?
>
> Here, when there is sensual desire, [ill will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and remorse, and doubt] in him, a monk understands "There is sensual desire [etc.] in me"; or when there is no sensual desire [etc.] in him, he understands "There is no sensual desire [etc.] in me"; and he also understands how unarisen desire arises, how arisen desire is abandoned, and how abandoned sensual desire [etc.] does not arise again in the future (Bodhi 2005, 286).

With practice, we can observe this happening; we can see how "unarisen desire, drowsiness, and restlessness" arise. For example, sometimes it's hard to concentrate on writing—it takes so much sustained attention, and I can always find other things to do. If I stop and look deeply, I can recognize how these thoughts and feelings arise: outside a beautiful view of the sunlight glimmering on Lake Huron impinges on my visual faculties (contact, *sparśa*). This evokes the latent tendency (*anuśaya*) to enjoy the feeling (*vedanā*) of the warm sun and soft breeze on my skin, the rocking of a boat amid the lulling sound of the waves. A craving (*tṛṣṇā*) arises, which I take as my own (*upādāna*)—"I want this now"—and soon I am out the door.

As antidotes or remedies to this, we can develop the "seven factors for awakening" and watch how "arisen desire is abandoned." If we apply ourselves, we can cultivate *mindfulness* to see all this, *investigate* the arising and falling of such phenomena, *energetically* focus and find *joy* in the process itself, and *calm* down enough to *concentrate* with *equanimity*. With practice, we can learn to discriminate which of these antidotes needs to be applied when: if we are tired, we need energy; if scattered, we need equanimity; if depressed, we need joy.

With mindfulness we can learn to note the arising and ceasing of our sensations, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, whether our mind is driven by lust or anger, or delusion, whether it is concentrated or scattered. With practice we can learn to observe all the processes that make up our daily lives—the aggregates subject to clinging—and to see them precisely *as* processes: "Such is bodily form [feeling, perception, karmic formations, and consciousness], such its origin, such its passing away" (Bodhi 2005, 287).

These practices ground our attention in the present, in the sensations or feelings that are currently occurring,[50] and preempt our habitual modes of ruminating and obsessing about ourselves. That is, mindful attention to the present helps forestall our constant mental jabber:

> When, monks, a noble disciple has clearly seen with correct wisdom as it really is this dependent arising and these dependently arisen phenomena, it is impossible that he will run back into the past, thinking: "Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past?" . . . Or that he will run into the future, thinking . . . Or that he will now be inwardly confused about the present . . . (SN 12.20).

50. "When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress." (*Bāhiya Sutta*, in Thanissaro 2013. *Dukkha* is translated here as "stress.")

Through such practices we learn to see reality as it is: as lacking anything—whether inner or outer—that we can grasp onto and call our own. Eventually, the Buddha declared, even the most deep-seated latent tendencies are eliminated:

> "How should one know and see so that, in regard to this body with consciousness and in regard to all external signs, I-making, mine-making, and the latent tendency to conceit no longer occur within?
>
> "Any kind of bodily form [etc.] whatsoever, monk, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one sees all form as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self'" (MN 109.13; Bodhi 2005, 341).

Conclusion

The early Buddhist path involves examining the disjunction between how the world appears and what analysis reveals. If we take our experiences at face value and accept the seeming reality of appearances, then we will always be chasing the chimera of substantial entities, attempting to solidify and hold onto what are inescapably transient processes. If instead we understand our experience as arising from impersonal causal processes that occur in discernable patterns of interaction—that is, in terms of dependent arising—then we can discern how these misleading appearances arise in dependence on our senses, our concepts, and our runaway ruminations, which proffer up an endless stream of apparent agents, entities, and essences. Analysis thus reveals that the world our perceptions proffer is already constructed, already a product of our sense faculties interacting with an environment, and only knowable in terms of those very processes.

Our deep sense of self-identity—whatever "I am"—is similarly constructed, similarly a complex product of the reflexive awareness of our bodily states together with our shared conceptual categories and linguistic labels, all overlaid on top of the living processes, the five aggregates, which we appropriate as our "own."

This emphasis on the constructed nature of both our external worlds and

internal subjectivity—and their mutually dependent interaction—anticipates the Yogācāra views on the constructed nature of objects and subjects developed centuries later. In this chapter, however, we have limited ourselves to the early Pāli texts and their modern interpreters in order to appreciate these perspectives on their own terms. We leave it to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the prolific translator of Pāli texts, to draw these conclusions:

> An experiential event can be viewed as a field distributed between two poles, the objective datum and the subjective act that cognizes it. Ordinarily . . . this polarity is reified into a sharp duality of subject and object. The subjective pole seems to coalesce into a substantially existent "I," an ego-self that hovers in the background as an autonomous and independent entity. The objective pole presents itself as an object that is there "for me," ready to serve or oppose my purposes; thus it becomes a potential object of craving or aversion. This process is what the suttas refer to as "I-making" and "mine-making" (*ahaṃkāra*, *mamaṃkāra*). It is the task of meditation to dismantle this structure by penetrating the selfless nature of all phenomena, whether pertaining to the objective or subjective poles of the experience (Bodhi 2011, 32).

3

Abhidharma: Analyzing Our Minds

> Apart from the discernment of the dharmas, there is no means to extinguish the afflictions, and it is by reason of the afflictions that the world wanders in the ocean of existence.
>
> —*Abhidharmakośa* 1.3

WE HAVE SURVEYED the basic worldview of early Buddhism (roughly 400–200 BCE), which forms the common background for all the Buddhist traditions that spanned the width and breadth of Asia over the next few millennia. For the Yogācāra school, the more immediate context was supplied by two developments closer to home: first, the Abhidharma traditions of psychological analysis, which provided many of the methods and terms Yogācārins would also use; and second, the burgeoning Mahāyāna traditions, which developed the concepts of emptiness and the two truths while advocating compassionate activity in this world as exemplified in the figure of the bodhisattva. Yogācāra represents a creative synthesis of these two developments, both built upon the early Buddhist heritage, and is nearly unintelligible without a basic understanding of them. We discuss Abhidharma in this chapter and early Mahāyāna in the next.

Historically, the Abhidharma movement (flourishing roughly from 200 BCE to 600 CE) sprang out of the need to organize and systematize the Buddha's variegated teachings. During his forty-five-year career across the Gangetic plain of northern India, the Buddha taught different people with different concerns, from lay men and women to beginning and advanced monks and nuns, skillfully attuning the content and style of his teachings to their varying needs and abilities. And he never set down a final summary of his teachings. It is little wonder that his followers soon started collating and organizing them, and establishing distinct stages of training, much like the sequenced curricula of modern universities. Indeed, the first sense of

the term *abhi-dharma*, the "higher doctrine," refers to teachings explicitly directed toward awakening. As the epigraph above alludes to, Abhidharma is the systematic attempt to analyze our psychological processes for the purpose of purifying our mental afflictions (*kleśa*), stopping our afflicted actions (*karma*), and attaining liberating insight.

These concerns gave rise to a body of literature composed over many centuries, whose earliest texts were collected in the Abhidharma Piṭaka, the third "basket" of early Buddhist texts. These endeavors occurred alongside the development of distinct sects, traditionally numbering eighteen, many of whom composed their own Abhidharmic treatises. We will primarily draw upon the influential *Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośa*), composed by Vasubandhu (fourth to fifth century CE).[51]

Vasubandhu was one of Indian Buddhism's most influential writers. An inveterate intellectual sojourner, his many treatises and wide-ranging commentaries set a standard for clarity of expression, intellectual rigor, and critical engagement with multiple strands of contemporaneous Indian thought.[52] His *Treasury of Abhidharma* remains one of the most studied Abhidharma texts. It is a presentation in verse of the doctrines of the Vaibhāṣika school, which he then subtly critiques in his own commentary on those verses, reflecting the views of the Sautrāntika school.[53] Two of his short texts, the *Thirty Verses* (*Triṃśikā*) and the *Twenty Verses* (*Viṃśatikā*), were influential expositions of the Yogācāra system as a whole and of *mere perception*, respectively. We closely examine the *Twenty Verses* in chapter 7.

Abhidharma systematization involved reformulating the early discourses in several specific ways:

- The idea that all things are impermanent was reformulated into the doctrine of *momentariness*.

51. See Gold 2015b.

52. See Jonathan C. Gold's comprehensive presentation and incisive analysis of Vasubandhu's corpus, *Paving the Great Way* (Gold 2015a).

53. For a classic study of the divergent doctrines of the different schools of classical Indian Buddhism, see Bareau 2013. The name Vaibhāṣika comes from that school's foundational Abhidharma text, the *Mahāvibhāṣa*, which was distilled in Vasubandhu's root verses. The Sautrāntika (i.e., Sūtra) school was also called Dārṣṭāntika, "those who teach through illustrations."

- The idea that experience is comprised of interactive processes was transformed into a systematic analysis of those processes and their complex interrelations.
- The idea that we can identify the components of these processes developed into the idea that each of them needs to be ultimately defined and characterized.
- The idea that the names given to collections of these processes (chariots, selves, and so on) are merely conventional designations led to a more explicit distinction between two levels of discourse, one commonplace and conventional, the other analytic and ultimate.[54]

These reformulations deeply enriched Buddhist psychological analyses but, at the same time, raised multiple problems that would be addressed by early Mahāyāna and classical Yogācāra.

Scope and Limitations of Abhidharmic Analysis

Briefly, the Abhidharmists attempted to formulate a precise technical language that could be used to *ultimately* analyze how things come about, in contrast to the imprecise ways we ordinarily talk. To describe what ultimately is, or how things ultimately arise, they sought to discern the most basic and irreducible elements constituting and supporting every experience. They called these elements *dharmas*, adding another sense to the multivalent term *dharma*. Each of these dharmas was defined in terms of its own-being (*svabhāva*), which possessed its own distinctive characteristic or mark (*svalakṣaṇa*) that distinguished it from others. In practice, this meant that they took the most important terms that the early Buddhists used to analyze our experiences—cognitive awareness, perception, feeling, and so forth—and gave them systematic definitions so that their meaning, functions, and interrelations would be clear and consistent—and communicable to others. Analysis of these dharmas, Abhidharmists insisted, is the only true and comprehensive account of reality "as it is." They created, in short, *dharmic discourse*, a mode of analysis and expression that would become the *lingua franca* of Buddhist scholasticism for many centuries thereafter.

54. See Nyanaponika 1998, 3–4, for a Theravāda view on this.

Dharmic discourse, however, created two kinds of problems, both of which would be addressed by the early Mahāyānists and Yogācārins. First, the claim that each dharma had its own-being, or own mark, was quickly criticized by the emerging Mahāyāna tradition (the topic of our next chapter), which noted that this idea of dharmas seemed perilously close to an essence or unchanging characteristic and thus contradicted the spirit, if not the letter, of dependent arising. Hence, they argued that dharmas are, ultimately, *empty* of such essences and characteristics.

The second problem stems, roughly, from an inconsistency between Abhidharma's means and ends. The ultimate aims of Abhidharma—to analyze our affective and cognitive processes in order to eliminate the afflictions that keep us bound to our compulsive behavioral patterns—were undermined by the implications of momentariness, the idea that *only momentarily present dharmas* are real and effective. This made accounting for the various dimensions of personal continuity over time, especially over multiple lifetimes, particularly difficult. How, after all, could karmic potential and the latent afflictions be described during moments when they are not manifest? Dharmic discourse suggests that they are simply not real. But this would undercut the very aim toward which they were devised, for there is no need to eliminate "unreal" afflictions. We call this the Abhidharma Problematic.

As we will see, the Yogācārins responded to these two problems in ways that would preserve the profundity of dependent arising: They rejected Abhidharma's claims about the ultimate status of dharmas and dharmic discourse but at the same time affirmed the analyses—couched in terms of conventional dharmas—of the latent dispositions and karmic potentials "stored" in the storehouse consciousness. Thus, to better understand the aims and content of Yogācāra's major teachings, we need to examine in some detail the contested status of dharmas and Abhidharmists' systems of dharmic analysis.

Our first task is to consider Abhidharma's characteristics carefully. If dharmic analysis is the only realistic account of the factors that are causally significant in our bondage to or liberation from saṃsāra, then how do we determine what they are? Different Abhidharma schools each had their own system, either seventy-five, eighty-two, or a hundred such dharmas.

Why did they disagree about this? Is such a small number adequate? Don't they inevitably miss important nuances?

In one respect, this is simply what a system entails. Systems have a fixed number of components whose characteristics and interrelationships are clearly defined. We see this in music, in language, in chemistry. Despite the infinite number of possible tonal intervals, Western music is organized around octaves, tones, and major and minor keys; similarly, all languages have a limited number of phonemes, whose distinct sounds entail distinct meanings. Neither system would work without clearly articulating the differences and interrelationships among their components. Establishing stable definitions based on a limited number of distinctions is what makes meaningful analysis possible, whether in language, music, or chemistry—and in Abhidharma. Just as chess pieces occupy a specific *logical* space regardless of where they sit in their physical space, so too dharmas demarcate a limited number of significant processes in *psycho*-logical space, regardless of individual variations. Thus the specific number of dharmas is not as important as their utility in facilitating insight and practice toward liberation.

The fact that there were such variations, however, raises other questions. In their efforts to analyze experience, did Abhidharmists simply name processes that were *already there* in some objective sense, such as the concept of *own-being* would suggest? Or did they themselves designate—*de-signate*, give names or signs to—those characteristics, those "own-marks," that served their analytic purposes: that is, by demarcating what they found to be karmically significant but without implying ontological claims about their ultimate existence? In other words, are their systems of analyzing our experience of the world accurate pictures of reality "as it is," as they repeatedly claimed? Or are they more like maps, heuristic devices to serve practical ends? And how would we know which is which? These questions were as hotly debated in classical Indian circles, both Hindu and Buddhist, as they are in the philosophy of science today.[55]

55. As Siderits (1997, 475) so succinctly puts it: "Philosophical discussions of 'natural kind' terms tend to overlook the actual practice of biologists, chemists, and physicists in their use of these classificatory devices—not to describe inalterable regularities in nature, but to express those idealizations of observed tendencies that are necessary for purposes of theory construction."

We will address these questions more thoroughly in the next chapter. Suffice to note here that although some Abhidharma schools clearly claimed that dharmas did ultimately exist, the pragmatic bent of Buddhism led other schools to a looser nominalism: the idea that concepts and terms are useful tools to work with, but their *truth* is determined by the result of their practice, not by claims about their existence. It is worth noting that while the different Abhidharma schools disagreed on both the number and the ontological status of dharmas, they largely agreed on the utility of this new, *abhidharmic* mode of analysis. In this respect, dharmic discourse became the shared idiom of scholastic Indian Buddhism for an entire millennium. And the system it produced—along with its problems—engaged the Yogācārins as much as other Buddhists.

Dharmas as insubstantial momentary flashings

There was more agreement about the phenomenology of the dharmas themselves—that is, how they describe our experience, especially our cognitive processes. The analyses that follow are challenging, and readers may benefit from rereading this section after they finish the chapter.

The heart of the Abhidharma project is the analysis of our psychological processes and the factors influencing them in order to identify and attenuate the afflictions driving our actions. To this end, Abhidharmists claimed not just that all dependently arisen phenomena are impermanent but that all dharmas are strictly *momentary*, lasting but an instant (*kṣaṇa*). This deepens the anti-substantialism of early Buddhism but at the same time undermines any simple sense of what a *dharma* is or refers to. Commenting on an early discourse, one Abhidharma text describes the arising and cessation of the *eye* as a distinct dharma:

> The eye, arising, does not come from any place; perishing, it does not remain in any place. In this way, the eye exists after having been nonexistent and, after having existed, disappears.[56]

The great Russian scholar Theodore Stcherbatsky (1866–1942) eloquently describes some of the implications of this brave new dharmic world:

56. *Paramārthaśūnyatāsūtra*; quoted in Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* ad 5.27b.

> The elements of existence [*dharmas*] are momentary appearances, momentary flashings into the phenomenal world out of an unknown source. . . . They disappear as soon as they appear, in order to be followed the next moment by another momentary existence. Thus a moment becomes a synonym of an element (*dharma*), two moments are two different elements. An element becomes something like a point in time-space. . . . A cause for the Buddhists was not a real cause but a preceding moment, which likewise arose out of nothing in order to disappear into nothing (Stcherbatsky 1956, 31).

What does this mean, that the eye neither comes from nor goes anywhere? That dharmas, the elements of existence, are momentary flashings, points in time-space? How does this help us understand our experiences? Let's explore this temporally, spatially, and conceptually.

Temporally, we can think of vision as functioning like a computer screen. A still photo on the screen seems static and unchanging. But each of its thousands of pixels, imperceptibly small, is being refreshed sixty to one hundred times a second, imperceptibly fast. Accordingly, the object *appears* to our eyes to be unchanging. Video clips are even more telling: the *appearance* of movement depends on these pixels continually firing in organized patterns, but there are "no things" coming from or going to anywhere—they are just pixels momentarily flashing in time-space.

Our eyeballs work in similar ways. They constantly move in very small arcs, called micronystagmus, continuously refreshing our retinal cells. If you keep your eyes completely still, then the objects in your field of vision, lacking any new information, will disappear into a nebulous formlessness. Similarly, we often don't hear the constant hum of a fluorescent lamp or refrigerator until it abruptly ends. Perception, in other words, requires that our sense faculties be continuously refreshed; *without change there is no perception.*

These momentary flashings also have spatial distinctions. There are situations where no distinct stimuli impinge upon our faculties. This can happen in the blizzard conditions called a *whiteout*, where everything is uniformly white; or when we don't see a perfectly camouflaged bug on a tree; or when we are floating dreamily in a sensory deprivation tank and our five senses

gradually slow down or stop—an experience that can also be cultivated in deep meditation.

In other words, for our sense organs to function, for conscious perception to occur, a stimulus must be distinct enough to trigger a response—a threshold that is determined by the structure of the sense organ—which then sends signals to the brain to process. Change and contrast are thus necessary for a stimulus to evoke a conscious perception. Once again, we see that the notion of *change* is not so much a proposition about objective reality as it is a condition for perceptual experience to occur. Stimuli are not isolated, context-free objects that independently *exist* but highly contextualized changes that dependently *occur*. Put differently, the conditions that make stimuli distinct are *constitutive* of cognitive awareness in the same way that temporal change is.[57] And it is these distinctive stimuli, these momentary flashings, that are the factors of experience called *dharmas*.

As another Russian Buddhologist, Piatigorsky (1984, 181), astutely observes:

> A *dharma*, in fact, "is" no thing, yet a term *denoting* (not being) a certain relation or type of relation to thought, consciousness, or mind. That is, *dharma* is . . . a purely *relational notion*.

It follows from this mode of analysis that dharmas, like sparks, arise "out of nothing in order to disappear into nothing." As relational notions, dharmas have no real substance or singular location. They are neither a *something* nor a *nothing* but denote whatever triggers discernable effects.[58] This follows from analyzing processes in terms of patterns of interaction—that is, in terms of dependent arising.

These distinct events, these dharmas that co-arise in "relation to

57. Similarly, Bateson (1979, 31 and 109) states that "perception operates only upon difference," yet "difference, being of the nature of relationship, is not located in time or in space . . . difference is precisely not substance . . . [it] has no dimensions. It is qualitative, not quantitative."

58. As Johansson (1979, 51) states about compounded phenomena (S. *saṃskāra*; P. *saṅkhāra*) in early Buddhism: "The world is continually being constituted through dynamic processes: it *consists* of processes, but processes do not *exist*; they are an interplay of forces without a material, rigid, *existing* substratum. These elementary dynamic processes are the *saṅkhāra*. Are they material? This question is not relevant. We know them only as conscious processes."

thought, consciousness, or mind," are relational in yet another, more reflexive or conceptual sense: they are elements in a system dependent on designation and definition. Piatigorsky (1984, 202n17) cautions that the Abhidharma is a "theory of consciousness." That is, individual dharmas occur within a context that functions not only *perceptually*, in relation to moments of sensory awareness such as vision and hearing, but—even more importantly—*conceptually*, within a system of mutually distinctive definitions. And these operate, like all language, in relation to mental awareness. Thus, while dharmas may ultimately *refer* to experiential phenomena, what *counts* as a dharma in any system must be distinguished from other dharmas—and this depends on their *distinct characteristics* (*svalakṣaṇa*). It follows that we cannot say what a dharma truly *is* (*svabhāva*) in and of itself apart from a *system* of analysis in which such distinctions are meaningful. Like phonemes in a language or the spaces on a chessboard, each dharma marks off a notional, logical, and psychological space within a system of designation that, in theory, encompasses the entire domain of relevant, conscious experience. The metapsychology of Abhidharma is thus a system of interrelated parts and processes, which we will examine presently.

One last caveat. Just as sensory awareness does not actively discern objects—it only *arises* when appropriate conditions exist—we must refrain from thinking that mental awareness *observes* dharmas, that it is an agent that actively cognizes objects called dharmas. That is a conventional but not ultimate way of speaking. Thus Vasubandhu, author of the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and soon-to-be Yogācāra philosopher, warns:

> The sūtra teaches: "By reason of the organ of sight and of visible matter there arises the visual consciousness"; there is not there either an organ that sees or visible matter that is seen; there is not there any action of seeing nor any agent that sees; this is only a play of cause and effect. In the light of [common] practice, one speaks, metaphorically, of this process: "The eye sees, and the consciousness discerns." But one should not cling to these metaphors . . . in the manner of popular speech (Pruden 1990, 118).

In summary, this Abhidharmic mode of analysis has four characteristics:

1. It is, in Bhikkhu Bodhi's words, a "*phenomenological* psychology" whose "primary concern . . . is to understand the nature of experience, and thus the reality on which it focuses is conscious reality, the world as given in experience" (Bodhi 1993, 4).
2. It also purports to be a *comprehensive* description of experience in systemic terms, in which all relevant factors are defined and distinguished from one another, and whose interrelationships are carefully mapped out.
3. Therefore, it is also, in Piatigorsky's (1984, 8) term, a "*metapsychology*," in that it self-consciously and systematically "deals with the various concepts and categories of consciousness as the primary objects of investigation." In short, a map of the mind.
4. Finally, Abhidharma thinkers considered the analysis of experience in terms of strictly momentary dharmas as the only ultimate account of *how things really are*—a claim that Mahāyānists will strongly reject.

The Abhidharma Problematic

Abhidharmic analyses of mind are quite similar to those we saw in the early discourses. But the assumptions outlined above created a set of fresh difficulties, what we will call the Abhidharma Problematic. On the one hand, to overcome illusion on the path to liberation, Abhidharmic analyses of mind deconstruct our sense of self as a singular unchanging entity. On the other hand, these analyses assume the coherence and continuity of what we nominally call a *person*. These two necessarily go together.

For example, whenever we analyze something into its component parts, we need to remember that the "thing" we chose to analyze has some kind of coherence. For example, we can learn a lot about a frog's physiology by decontextualizing it, removing it from its environment and dissecting it under a microscope. But we only know the meaning and function of these features by recontextualizing them in relation to the life of the organism as whole and to its living environment—that is, to its patterns of interaction over time. Without this, we would only have a collection of unrelated facts

about miscellaneous body parts—indeed, we couldn't even designate them "body" parts (Rose 1997, 7–13).

This is especially crucial for classical Buddhist thought since, despite its emphasis on the idea of no-self, the coherence and continuity of the individual mindstream (*cittasantāna*) are essential to their definition of a sentient being. It is individual mindstreams that are caught in the continuous cycle of rebirth, are driven by actions instigated by the afflictions, and are only liberated from this cycle when these afflictions are fully eradicated. Classical Indian Buddhist notions therefore assume the *effective* reality of individuals in these key respects:

- That the individual stream of mind persists across multiple lifetimes
- That the afflictions are not fully eradicated until the last stages of the path, so they too persist from one life to the next
- That the karmic potential accumulated from previous deeds, which come to fruition at some later time, also persists over multiple lifetimes
- That the mindstreams of Buddhist adepts are irrevocably altered by meditative attainments, even after these adepts return to ordinary states of mind

To reiterate: being "stuck in saṃsāra" is defined in terms of the coherence and continuity of an individual mindstream accompanied by the afflictions (*kleśa*) and karmic potentials. If such individuality had no reality whatsoever—if no-self meant no individual or no continuity[59]—then there would be no problem and hence no need for its solution, no saṃsāra and thus no nirvāṇa. If the Abhidharmic method of analysis in terms of purely momentary dharmas were to reduce personal coherence and continuity to a mere fiction, this would undermine the very purpose of their analyses as defined by Vasubandhu (AK 1.3): "Apart from the discernment of the dharmas, there is no means to extinguish the afflictions, and it is by reason of the afflictions that the world wanders in the ocean of existence."

This then is the Abhidharma Problematic: The indispensable relationship between causal conditioning and temporal continuity—how the past

59. In traditional Buddhist terms this would be the extreme of annihilationism, that any causal consequences of our actions are annihilated at death.

continues to affect the present—becomes nearly inexpressible in an ultimate analysis in which only momentary, presently effective dharmas are truly real.

In short, to consistently accomplish their larger aims, the Abhidharmists needed to account for the coherence and continuity of individual mindstreams in exclusively dharmic terms, in *ultimate* discourse (as they defined it). To this end, they set out to map the relationships among dharmas, that is, the patterns seen in our recurring psychological processes. This entailed two major tasks: accounting for the coherence of an individual in the present moment—that is, *synchronically*—and accounting for the continuity of an individual over time, *diachronically*.

Analyzing *Citta* and Its Processes

To get a sense of this, let's first look at some common terms for psychological states, processes, and characteristics and ask some Abhidharmic-type questions. How do we know what is or isn't a dharma? How do our cognitive processes, afflictive responses, and their ensuing actions and results interact with each other? How, in short, does Abhidharma work in practice?

Let's start with sets of terms that would be good candidates for a taxonomy of dharmas:

- Happiness, unhappiness, sadness, relaxation, ease, stress, anxiety, generosity, greed, anger, desire, lust, fatigue, energy, pain, and pleasure
- Perception, sensation, attention, being focused or scattered
- Thinking, intuition, understanding, and willing/intending
- Acting, talking, walking, forgetting, remembering, dreaming, and imagining
- Character traits, tendencies, habits, and dispositions

We can first ask about the range of each term. Do they truly differ from each other, or is *lust*, for example, just a powerful *desire*? Are some of these combinations of others—sadness is memory and unhappiness together—that can be reduced to only the basic, irreducible elements? For our first aim is to pare them down to a precise list of truly essential states and conditions.

Second, which of these processes can arise together and which cannot?

Can we be happy and sad at the same time? Tired and energetic? Focused and scattered? Some processes are mutually exclusive, others co-arise under only certain conditions, and others necessarily co-arise. As we saw in the early discourses, *feeling* typically arises from *contact*, and *cognitive awareness*, *perception*, and *feeling* are said to be nearly inseparable. This helps us identify their co-occurrence.

Even more crucially, what are the necessary and recurrent *causal* relations among processes? Does being unhappy *make* us angry? Does the first cause the second? Or is anger simply correlative—something we feel whenever we are tired or unhappy? How can we tell which is a cause (*hetu*) and which is merely a condition (*pratyaya*)? And if they are correlated, what is it that connects them? This is important for understanding how we respond to specific stimuli.

How, for example, are memory and emotion connected? Every time I smell cut grass, I remember my childhood home—the trees, the clouds, even the worms—evoking the warm, relaxed feeling of endless summer days. Whenever I taste curry, I recall my years in India, assailed by the phantasmagoria of its sights and sounds and smells, evoking ambivalent responses mixed with an intense vivacity. And when I recall being mugged one night at knifepoint, my heart pumps and blood pressure rises, as I feel anxious and fearful. What are the connections (*bandha*) between these? In other words, if something "pushes our buttons," what and where are those *buttons*? What are the connections driving this *pushing*?

Finally, how can we free ourselves from these habits? Can we direct our focus toward identifying their connections and recognizing them when they reoccur, thereby weakening our responses and freeing ourselves from our ingrained and mostly unconscious cognitive and affective patterns? Unsurprisingly, the Abhidharmists emphatically answer "Yes!"

Immediate experience, latent tendencies, and karmic potentials

These are the general aims and methods of Abhidharmic analyses. Let us examine them in more specific detail, ignoring for now differences among the major early Buddhist schools—the Sthaviravāda (forerunners of Theravāda), Sarvāstivāda/Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, and Yogācāra.[60]

60. See Bareau 2013 for an extensive compilation of the historical schools, traditionally num-

Most schools held that in each moment, our general state of mind (*citta*) necessarily involves several processes. Specifically, for the simple awareness (*vijñāna*) that we are perceiving (*saṃjñā*) something to arise, our sense faculties need to be impacted (*sparśa*) enough to produce sufficient feeling or sensation (*vedanā*)—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—to catch our attention (*manasikāra*) and focus (*ekāgratā*), to which we intend (*cetanā*) to respond. Each moment of *citta*, then, involves multiple processes that *hang together* to provide the sense of coherent experience we usually take for granted. These are considered *universal* cognitive processes, though their specific components vary somewhat from school to school.[61]

Abhidharmists also delineated how our responses to experience drive our actions. Our emotional reactions are often so powerful that they overpower and envelop our minds.[62] It is the specific afflictive processes that are "conjoined with mind" in this way that determine the *karmic nature* of those actions. These actions are classified depending on the feeling that results from them:[63]

- Skillful actions lead to pleasurable (*sukha*) feelings.
- Unskillful actions lead to unpleasurable (*duḥkha*) feelings.
- Neutral actions lead to indeterminate results (*avyākṛta*).

But what is it that instigates these powerful afflictive responses? What "pushes our buttons"? To understand these connections, it is necessary to consider one's past experiences, one's history. By careful observation, it is possible to roughly map out the recurring patterns among our actions, their results, and our afflictive responses. This enabled Abhidharmists to specify more precisely the relations between these processes and their compounding results over time—that is, to explain what makes them habitual.

The bond that connects the results of our past actions with our present re-actions—that is, the entire drama of creating and then becoming bound

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bered eighteen, and their distinctive positions on a wide variety of topics; see also Waldron 2003, 175–77, for a brief list of positions relevant to the issues discussed in this book.

61. Sarvāstivāda lists ten, Theravāda seven, and Yogācāra just five.

62. Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* 2.34b–d. Stcherbatsky 1956, 25–26.

63. Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* 4.55c–d: *vipākaḥ punar vedanāpradhānaḥ*. See also AN 4.170.

by habits—is discussed in much the same way as we saw in the early Buddhist texts. Owing to our latent tendencies (*anuśaya*), we respond to specific feelings with afflicted attitudes that instigate further actions that lead to further results and responses—the cycle of action, result, and re-action. Learning to recognize the bonds between our feelings or sensations and our afflictive reactions and working to free ourselves from these habitual patterns is, as in the early texts, one of the crucial aims of the Abhidharmic analyses.

The latent tendencies—our habitual afflictions—are by no means incidental to Buddhist analyses of our afflicted existence; indeed, they lie at its very heart. As Vasubandhu notes:

> It is said that the world in its variety arises from action. It is because of the latent tendencies that actions accumulate; without the latent tendencies they are not capable of giving rise to a new existence. Thus the latent tendencies should be known as the root of existence (AKBh ad 5.1a).

The latent tendencies function, in effect, as the infrastructure that connects the results of our actions—predominantly pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings—with our (typically) afflicted responses to these feelings. As in the early teachings, Vasubandhu says we tend to respond to pleasure with desire, to pain with aversion, and to neutral feeling with ignorance. Why? Because:

- "desire underlies[64] pleasurable feeling,
- aversion underlies unpleasant feeling, and
- ignorance underlies neutral feelings" (AKBh 5.45).

Digging even deeper, the Abhidharmists recognized that we have a tendency to react to some things more strongly than others. This is because our latent tendencies are *bound* (*samprayukta*, *bandha*)[65] to those stimuli,

64. "Underlie" is *anuśete*, the verbal form of *anuśaya*. See note 46.

65. "Within a certain person, an *anuśaya* or habitual tendency attaches itself to a certain object; this person is bound to this object by this *anuśaya*" (Pruden 1988, 3:804. AKBh *ad* 5.23).

which tend to *draw out* (*niya*) such responses. If we have not eliminated the tendency toward sensual desire, then sensual desire arises whenever "an object that leads to an eruption of sensual desire" appears in our sense field. We can readily observe this in our own lives: the smell of perfume makes my nervous system perk up, and most of us feel nostalgic when we hear music we loved as a child; conversely, if we have been emotionally scarred from verbal abuse, then hateful speech may trigger pain and anxiety.

The crucial relationship between our karmic actions, our afflictions, and the perpetuation of our compulsive behavioral patterns is now painfully clear:

- An *action* instigated by the afflictions leads to an appropriate result in the future.
- That result is experienced as a pleasant or unpleasant *feeling*.
- Underlying these feelings are the associated *latent tendencies* that get triggered by them.
- These latent tendencies in turn instigate fresh actions, and so on.

No wonder Vasubandhu calls the latent tendencies the root of existence!

For example, sometimes I see commercials for fast cars, accompanied by all the signs of contemporary success: stylish clothes, beautiful women, sleek offices, the latest tech. These images impinge upon my visual and aural faculties, triggering a whole series of thoughts and fantasies colored by greed and desire, if not lust—informed by tendencies long fostered in commercial cultures where Dylan's "neon madmen" ply their artful trade. If I desire and work to obtain these things, I set into motion certain karmic energies, which both strengthen those desires and keep me bound to the ingrained illusion—the underlying *ignorance*—that such possessions bring lasting happiness. My actions reinforce these tendencies and the illusions they depend on, becoming entrenched habits of thought and feeling. Eventually, I see myself as a "Mercedes owner," a man of wealth and taste. In the Buddhist view, this ultimately leads to unhappiness and frustration, because such symbols of power and pleasure cannot provide lasting happiness.

It takes an active, conscious intention (*cetanā*) to detach my feelings from the visual pleasure and mental gratification these illusions elicit and to subdue my responses to them. And it takes sustained effort to comprehend

just how effectively such images advert and capture my attention (*ad-vertise*, "to make turn toward") and to realize just how empty their promises are. If we extrapolate these analyses from consumer culture, whose machinations are largely invisible to its audience, to our entire lives, we may begin to appreciate what a radical transformation Buddhist liberation entails.

Dharmic Discourse and Causal Continuity

Although these latent tendencies lay at the root of our human predicament, they are not readily reconciled with the Abhidharmic emphasis on strictly momentary, presently occurring dharmas. For as long as they remain latent—unless and until they become active—it is impossible to discern, or even account for, their presence. Their causal influences are not readily integrated into standard Abhidharma karmic theory; as we will see, the devil is in the details.

First, Abhidharmists claimed that certain kinds of actions lead to certain kinds of results, which they expressed in vegetative metaphors: actions (*karma*) are the causes (*hetu*) that plant seeds (*bīja*) that will eventually bear fruit (*phala*) or come to maturation (*vipāka*). In short, actions are the cause of maturation (*vipāka-hetu*) insofar as they lead to a matured fruit or result (*vipāka-phala*). These karmic effects, however, can only be caused by *presently* occurring causes or immediately preceding factors, not by past dharmas, which by definition no longer exist.

Few of our conscious experiences are strictly momentary. Abhidharmists recognized that many of our cognitive processes occur too quickly to be consciously registered; we only notice them when the same content persists for many moments. This is the *homogeneous cause* (*sabhāga-hetu*), in which dharmas of the same kind follow uniformly and automatically upon each other, like a stream. But karmic fruit based on past actions interrupts this continuity. So the problem arises: where does it come from, if only present and immediately preceding dharmas have causal efficacy?

Last, our actions are accompanied by an *omnipresent cause* (*sarvatraga-hetu*)—ignorance—which subtly colors all our actions until it is fully eliminated and we are finally liberated (AKBh ad 2.57c). But how could we ever avoid its pernicious influence if it is always present?

In short, Abhidharma theory—particularly the idea that only present,

momentary phenomena are real, that only *present* dharmas truly exist—makes it difficult to explain how causal influences from the past could persist over time in a latent state and become karmically effective in the present. In this way, the Abhidharma Problematic raised a series of *explanatory* problems for which most Abhidharma schools, including Yogācāra, proffered various solutions.

The persistence of karmic potential and latent tendencies

What were these explanatory problems?

First, analyses of our psychological processes in terms of momentary, present events cannot describe the persistence of either karma or the afflicted tendencies in their latent forms. It is difficult to describe *in dharmic terms* the direct causal connections between an originating action in the past, the heaped-up potential for it to ripen later (*karma-upacaya*)—which all Indian Buddhist schools accepted—and its actual ripening (*vipāka-phala*) at some future moment. How does this *potential* for karmic fruition persist during the interim between action and its result?

Say, for example, I give money to a charity working to prevent homelessness. Then, some months later, someone unrelated to that does me a small favor and this results in a pleasurable sensation—first physical, then psychological. Traditional Buddhists might consider this a result of my earlier act of charity. But how could this occur if that earlier act is past and gone and only presently occurring dharmas are causally effective? What would be the immediate cause of this resultant pleasure? It could not arise from an immediately preceding condition of the same kind (*samāntara-pratyaya*), since the act of giving occurred way in the past and I have been experiencing a variety of mental states since then. For karma to make sense in dharmic terms, there must not only be causal continuity between immediately contiguous moments carrying this potential; like an electric current, there must also be an *unbroken* succession of truly real—that is, presently occurring—moments, occurring one after the other in an unbroken stream. Without that, any connection between past actions and present results would have no reality—at least in dharmic terms.

The same sort of problem arises for the persistence of our latent tendencies (*anuśaya*). My anger flares up (*paryavasthāna*) and envelops me (*anuparivartana*) when some mindless passenger in the subway station in

Berkeley walks right into me while texting, triggering my latent tendency toward anger. Just moments before, however, I was enjoying a glorious view of the Golden Gate Bridge across the bay, and this tendency was nowhere to be seen. Where did *that* come from? Where or how does the tendency exist when I am not actively angry? For these tendencies to be considered *real*—that is, to be presently occurring dharmas—there must be an unbroken succession of continuously present tendencies that connects past and present outbursts of anger. But this too is inexplicable in strictly dharmic terms. This problem is thrown into sharp relief by the idea that latent afflictions toward greed, aggression, and "omnipresent" ignorance, especially the view "I am," persist during countless lifetimes until the attainment of buddhahood.

Third, it is not only difficult for dharmic analysis to describe karmic potentials and latent tendencies *diachronically*, over extended periods of time, but even immediate succession between heterogeneous states (my moment of joy viewing the Golden Gate Bridge immediately followed by a moment of anger) would be problematic for much the same reason: there is too strong a difference between these two states to be accounted for by immediately preceding homogeneous conditions alone.

This highlights the problem with the very notion of latency or potentiality. If we have stores of karmic potential and latent tendencies for all kinds of karmic fruition and emotional outbursts from our many actions in this and previous lifetimes, then where or how do these latencies persist in the mindstream from moment to moment? If they are real dharmas, and hence continue unbrokenly in the present, as Abhidharma doctrine insists they must, then why don't they affect our experience in each and every moment? And if, as they insist, ignorance is omnipresent, how could we ever develop wisdom?

More systemically, if only presently occurring dharmas are real, then Abhidharmic analysis cannot be, as it claims, a *complete* account of who and what we are. Some of the most crucial aspects of our individual existence—karma and kleśa—can only be described conventionally in terms of the ongoing stream of mind—and a "stream," of course, is a metaphor, a *designation* for a collection of momentary events, not a real entity in its own right. In other words, to describe the totality of who we are synchronically, in the present, Abhidharma resorted to *conventional* discourse in order to complement its *ultimate* discourse couched in momentary dharmas.

Finally, Abhidharma analysis clearly acknowledges the influence of the *active* afflictions: when they are active and enveloping our mind, they are conjoined to our overall state of mind (*citta-samprayukta*). But it also recognized in each moment of mind the presence of miscellaneous supporting conditions which are not conjoined to our main state of mind (*citta-viprayukta*) but which enable our psychological processes to function. These are, for example, the fact that dharmas arise and pass away; that we can comprehend the meaning of events persisting longer than the present moment, such as complete sentences;[66] and some schools include the idea that karmic potential and latent tendencies stand ever ready, as it were, to mature or manifest and overwhelm us emotionally. The factors that are disconnected from our conscious states varied slightly for each school. But the very existence of this category demonstrates that Abhidharmists recognized the limitations of their analyses based on momentary dharmas alone.[67]

The ultimate soteriological aim of dharmic analysis, its very *raison d'être*, thus requires reference to the ongoing stream of mind (*citta*), and all its accompaniments, that effectively constitutes our saṃsāric existence. A snapshot of the present moment alone reveals neither the direction nor the intensity of our karmic trajectory.[68] This requires a more expansive view, one that acknowledges our more enduring—not permanent or inherent, but continuously renewed—characteristics, such as our habitual dispositions and potentialities.

These would be less problematic were we to acknowledge, contrary to its claims, that Abhidharma is *not* a comprehensive account of who and what

66. Ong makes a similar observation: "For the real word 'nevertheless,' the sounded word, cannot ever be present all at once, as written words deceptively seem to be. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. By the time I get to the 'the-less,' the 'ne-ver' is gone . . . A word is an event, a happening, not a thing, as letters make it appear to be. So is thought: 'This is paper' is an occurrence, an event in time. We grasp truth articulately only in events. Articulated truth has no permanence." (Ong 1986, 24).

67. See Cox 1995.

68. The doctrine of momentariness skirts the borders of coherence as well, as sociologist Thomas Luckmann points out: "Subjective experience considered in isolation is restricted to mere actuality and is void of meaning. Meaning is not an inherent quality of subjective processes but is bestowed on it in interpretive acts . . . derived from the relation of ongoing processes to the scheme of interpretation [which] . . . rests upon a certain degree of detachment. Such detachment cannot originate in a simple succession of isolated subjective processes . . . *a genuinely isolated subjective process is inconceivable*" (Luckmann 1967, 45).

we are. As Piatigorsky (1984, 202n17) rightly warns: "The Abhidhamma does not deal with what is non-conscious, because the Abhidhamma is a 'theory of consciousness,' and the rest simply does not exist in the sense of the Abhidhamma." In other words, almost anything outside the moment-to-moment arising of *conscious* awareness—what we are currently aware of—is simply inexpressible in dharmic terms. And it is the exclusive validity accorded to the synchronic analysis of momentary mental processes that threatened to render that very analysis religiously vacuous by undermining the validity of its ultimate soteriological context—the diachronic dimension of saṃsāric continuity and its cessation that Vasubandhu refers to in the epigraph of this chapter.

The Abhidharma thinkers were aware of these problems, and most of the schools we know about attempted to address them in one way or another. We shall briefly review several of these responses, limiting ourselves to their relevance for our focus on Yogācāra.

Seeds, Streams, and Metaphors

Analysis of our psychological processes in terms of dharmas provided a powerful means of understanding our minds, one that to this day guides and informs the practice of mindfulness in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition and beyond. But it also produced an array of problems that served as a springboard for later developments in Indian Buddhism, as we will soon see in Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and in multiple Yogācāra texts. Here, we will examine one concept that played a central role in this: the metaphor of a seed to depict both karmic potential and the latent afflictions.

The Abhidharma version of the *two truths*—soon to be radically reinterpreted in Mahāyāna—increased the gulf between the momentary cognitive processes analyzed in strictly dharmic terms and the more persisting aspects of each individual, couched in the conventional terms of the mindstream. We see this in the two senses of the term *vijñāna*, cognitive awareness and consciousness, in the early Buddhist texts. The first occurs in relation to our intermittent cognitive processes, focused on the six kinds of sensory and mental awareness, while the second refers to the ongoing stream of consciousness that persists uninterruptedly over multiple lifetimes and is closely

associated with the accumulation of karmic potential. These two aspects of *vijñāna*—the immediately present and the continually persisting—were not conceptually distinguished in early Buddhist texts but together provided a more comprehensive picture of who and what we are over time.

The persisting aspects of our mindstream are discussed in those parts of the *Treasury of Abhidharma* that are thought to represent the views of the Sautrāntika school, "those who follow the sūtras"—so named because they rejected mainstream Abhidharmic claims that dharmas and dharmic discourse were ultimately true. These passages rely on the fertile metaphor of a seed (*bīja*) to denote both the potentiality for karma to come to fruition (*phala*) and the persistence of the latent afflictions. Seeds were not considered distinct and momentary dharmas but were instead identified with the mindstream itself. We'll examine a few such passages from Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma Autocommentary*. Vasubandhu would later use nearly the same terminology in several important Yogācāra texts.

The first passage focuses on the generative function of seeds: a latent disposition is a seed that is sleeping but has the ability to wake up, to overwhelm one's mind, and like ordinary seeds to engender similar states:

> The affliction that is dormant is called a latent disposition; that which is awakened is an outburst.
>
> And what is that [affliction] that is dormant? It is carried along in a seed state that is not manifest.
>
> What is awakening? It is being present.
>
> What is called a seed state? It is the capacity (*śakti*) of an individual for an affliction to arise from a [previous] affliction, like the capacity for memory to arise from experiential knowledge, and like the capacity for sprouts and so on to produce a grain of rice bred from a [previous] grain of rice (AKBh ad 5.1d–2a).

The seeds here are carried or "bound" along (*anubandha*) in an individual, just like the latent dispositions, which—etymologically speaking—"sleep alongside" (*anuśaya*) it.

The next passage uses "seeds" to refer to the potential for karmic fruition:

> And what is called a *seed*? Any psychophysical organism (*nāma-*

> *rūpa*) that is capable (*samartha*) of producing a fruit, either mediately or immediately, through a specific point of development of the mindstream.
>
> What is called a *specific point of development*? It is the mindstream being in a different state.
>
> What is called the *mindstream*? It is the karmic formations of the three times existing as cause and effect (AKBh ad 2.36d).

Note the definitions in these passages:

- "Mindstream" refers to the karmic formations (*saṃskāra*), engendered by past actions and their resulting structures, that persist over time as cause-and-effect relations.[69]
- "Seeds" refers to the capacity of that stream—of the organism as a whole—to give rise to the results of previous actions.
- These results modify that stream—"being in a different state"—the final fruition of which is a "specific development of the mindstream" (*santati-pariṇāma-viśeṣa*).

We should note that this image, the mixed metaphor of seeds in a stream to represent karmic potentials, is not adding anything new to Buddhist doctrine. It is a metaphor (not a dharma) for talking about the karmic relationship between cause and effect that is expressed in one form or another in all classical Buddhist traditions. All intentional actions—that is, all karmic actions—are thought to generate the potential for future results, future modifications in the mindstream. This is a constant, dynamic process: we continuously perform intentional actions of body, speech, and mind, which are continuously producing effects, bearing fruits, which are continuously modifying our minds and bodies.

69. See the explanation of karmic formations in the context of the twelve limbs on pages 45–47. The ninth chapter of the *Treasury of Abhidharma Autocommentary*, effectively its own treatise on the category of person, also states that *vijñāna* is just a conventional name for the mindstream with nothing but its own series as cause. Another passage defines the stream of *citta* as the "continued production of *citta* from earlier action (*karma*)" (Stcherbatsky 1976, 57 and 72).

Accordingly, the metaphor of seeds is also used to depict the continuities in our lives over time, particularly during the process of rebirth:

> Mental intention projects renewed existence. That projected [existence] is, in turn, produced from the seed of consciousness that is infused by karma. Thus these two are predominant in bringing forth the existence that is not yet arisen (AKBh ad 3.41c–d).

Seeds are explicitly connected here to consciousness (*vijñāna*), which, as we saw in the early teachings, is perpetuated by the propelling energies of karma instigated by craving. The energetic potential from these actions, now couched in terms of seeds, is "infused" (*paribhāvita*) into the stream of consciousness. And then intention (that is, karma) and consciousness project (*akṣepa*) and produce, respectively, another existence.

In sum, our individual saṃsāric existence—variously referred to as name-and-form, individual (*ātmabhāva*), or basis (*āśraya*)—is little more than this mass of accumulated karmic potential, the inertia of our latent dispositions, and the sum of our behavioral and cognitive complexes (*saṃskāra*), all now described in terms of the metaphors of seeds and the stream.

Liberation then is defined as the eradication of these seeds—of all the potentials and dispositions, and the maleficent influences they impart to our actions. Echoing the early teachings (AN 3.34), Vasubandhu says that like seeds made infertile by fire, the absence of such seeds in their mind-stream distinguishes those who have eradicated the afflictions, noble beings (*āryas*) on the supramundane path, from ordinary beings who have not:

> The basis of the ārya has been transformed through the force of the path of seeing, so the destroyed afflictions will not be able to sprout again. It is said that the basis is without seeds, the afflictions having been destroyed as if burned by fire, whereas the seeds are merely damaged by the mundane path (AKBh ad 2.36c–d).

Potentiality as nominal

We should not be misled by the apparent substantiality of these metaphors. A "seed" merely refers to the potential for karmic results to occur and for the latent tendencies to arise. But potentials, tendencies, and their close analog, *imprints* (*vāsanā*), were not considered ultimately real dharmas. They have only *nominal* existence (*prajñaptisat*), established through designation, convention, or common usage.[70] They are not part of dharmic discourse.

This is not a minor point. Karma theory posits that once we set certain energies into motion by our actions, they will at some future date lead to an analogous result (unless purified or burned up on the path of seeing). In the interim between an action and its result, our mindstream "possesses" the potential for that result to occur.

But what that potentiality "really is," in an ontological sense, is not as straightforward as it seems. Scientists count on action potentials or charge potentials in cells, neurons, and batteries, or the potential energy "in" a boulder perched high upon a precipice. All of these are defined, however obliquely, in terms of their relation to other components of a system or to its larger contexts—neurological processes, electromagnetic and gravitational fields, and so forth. *Potential* is not a substance. It is only meaningful in relation to these surrounding fields and its enabling conditions.

For example, we might say a piece of firewood possesses a certain number of BTUs, but that is true only if it is burned in an environment with sufficient oxygen. The statement already implies an environment such as ours; it would not burn, and so would have no BTUs, in outer space. In other words, this potential is not an *intrinsic* quality of the firewood but depends on specific, mostly unstated, conditions. These enabling conditions are sufficiently regular in our small corner of the universe that we can take them for granted most of the time, allowing us to talk as if they were "real"—in the limited sense that we can repeatedly and reliably observe and measure causal relationships in these specific conditions. But we ought not on that

70. Shastri 1981, 219: *śakti bījaṃ vāsanā iti eka ayaṃ arthaḥ . . . śaktiviśeṣa eva bījam. na bījaṃ nāma kiñcit asti, prajñaptisattvāt*; "Capability, seed, and imprint have the same sense. The seed is a specific capability. . . . It doesn't really exist at all, because it is nominally existent."

account to treat this potential as a "something," nor imagine that the wood actually "possesses" such intrinsic properties. These have only a relational or conventional existence, not an ultimate one. And if potentiality is defined in terms of the relationship between processes, then it does not inherently "exist" in either of them; it refers to the *possibility* of something occurring under specific conditions. We need to avoid reifying these things.

Conclusion

We have seen that some Abhidharmists complemented the systematic technical language of dharmas with conventional and naturalistic metaphors such as seeds and streams in order to better account for their most fundamental doctrines. This testifies not just to the limitations of dharmic discourse but to the ubiquity of the Abhidharma Problematic. It also points to problems any conceptual system faces.

Recall that the Buddha considered his teachings a raft to get to the other shore of nirvāṇa. On that basis, many interpreters consider early Buddhism a kind of nominalism, in which doctrines serve pragmatic purposes but do not necessarily stand for *things* in the world on a one-on-one basis, as representational views of language claim to do. By contrast, most Abhidharma schools, though differing in some crucial respects, share a common desire to discern what is *really there* and to express that reality in the most precise and succinct language possible—in terms of irreducible factors, or dharmas. This led them to define each dharma in terms of its distinct nature (*svabhāva*) or characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*). However, insofar as they considered dharmas to be foundational elements, the irreducible "building blocks" out of which all complex experience is constructed, they threatened to contradict the more basic teaching of dependent arising—that all things arise through causes and conditions and therefore have no permanent, unitary nature. In short, Abhidharmic analysis tends to treat dharmas as if they were *things*; that is, this reified Abhidharma tends toward a kind of *realism*, the view that the world is populated with real, substantial things that "truly exist."

There are several reasons we should be circumspect about this Abhidharmic realism, as we should be about any conceptual system. The building-block metaphor encourages us to imagine that, unlike other stimuli that

only occur in a process of interaction, dharmas actually exist independently of our awareness of them, waiting to be discovered. This not only contravenes the basic perspective of dependent arising, but it could never be demonstrated: the only dharmas we ever discern are those we actually *do* discern. We simply don't know what is unknowable.

Second, the claim to being truly real suggests that, unlike other stimuli that are correlative with the structure of our faculties, dharmas are not correlative with our mental faculties, with the concepts that are embedded and developed from experience and learning. It suggests that dharmas are things independent of these faculties, conceivable things unmediated by concepts. This, too, contravenes the view of dependent arising.

Finally, this trend toward realism encourages us to treat dharmas not as components within impersonal causal processes (dependent arising) but as real agents acting upon real objects: feeling actively feels, consciousness cognizes, intention intends, and so forth.[71] This is like saying that gravity *makes* things fall rather than seeing gravity as the *name* we apply (a designation) to the persistent attraction we can observe and measure between masses. We seldom notice such semantic sleights of speech for the reifications they are. But Vasubandhu, who soon after his Abhidharma work embraced an even more thoroughgoing Mahāyānist nominalism, warned us that,

> The sūtra teaches: "By reason of the organ of sight and of visible matter there arises the visual consciousness"; there is not there either an organ that sees, or visible matter that is seen; there is not there any action of seeing, nor any agent that sees; this is only a play of cause and effect. In the light of [common] practice, one speaks, metaphorically, of this process: "The eye sees, and the consciousness discerns." But one should not cling to these metaphors (AKBh ad 1.42d, in Pruden 1988, 118).

The genius of the Buddha was that he saw things in terms of dependent arising, that all things arise and cease in dependence on conditions. The

71. For example, Bodhi 2000, 81, says, "Attention (i.e., orienting) is the mental factor responsible for the mind's advertence to the object." Following the impersonal syntax of dependent arising we might better say, "Attention is what we *call* the mind's advertence to the object."

trajectory of Indian Buddhist thought has been to apply this perspective to more and more phenomena—from selves and things to dharmas and doctrines. Every time one group of Buddhists imagines it has a *true* handle on reality, a true description, other Buddhists soon remind it that descriptions are rafts to use, not things to grasp onto. Hence, the Mahāyāna discourses in our next chapter will critique the idea that there is any single, exclusively *true* picture of reality and suggest instead that *every* Buddhist teaching is but another raft or map, helpfully pointing a way toward seeing things as they are—without ultimately defining exactly *how* they are. Not only mindstreams, seeds, and tendencies, they will argue, but all knowledge, all teachings, all doctrines, including Buddhist ones, are in a sense useful metaphors. Such is the vision of the *Diamond Sūtra* to which we now turn.

4

Early Mahāyāna: The Perfection of Wisdom and Nāgārjuna

Before I had studied Chan for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers.

—Chan master Qingyuan Weixin[72]

One aim of the physical sciences has been to give an actual picture of the material world. One achievement of physics in the twentieth century has been to show that such an aim is unattainable.

—Simon Critchley (2014)

Historical Background

During its first half millennium, Buddhism evolved into a distinct religious tradition in ancient India. Not only did various new sects arise, traditionally said to number eighteen, but so did Mahāyāna Buddhism, a collection of complex, often fervently devotional, traditions based on newly "discovered" sūtras, discourses ascribed to the Buddha himself. These Mahāyāna traditions eventually spread throughout Asia, becoming dominant in Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Yogācāra Buddhism

72. Watts 1951, 126 and 220. *Chan* is a sect in Chinese Buddhism, pronounced "Zen" in Japanese.

was central to the development of Mahāyāna and has been particularly influential in these latter countries.

As a distinct development within Indian Buddhism, though, Yogācāra was preceded not just by the beginnings of Mahāyāna in general but by the momentous developments in Buddhist thought expressed in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and in the brilliant works of Nāgārjuna, the founding spirit of what later developed into the Madhyamaka school. The central doctrine of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras was the idea of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*): that all phenomena, even dharmas, are empty of their *own-being* (*svabhāva*) or *essence*. Emptiness takes the traditional Buddhist notion of *anātman*, that there is no permanent essential self (*ātman*), and extends it to the essence of dharmas as posited by the Abhidharmists. These are expressed in Mahāyāna as the two selflessnesses: the selflessness of persons (*pudgala-nairātmya*), and the selflessness of dharmas (*dharma-nairātmya*).

Accordingly, early Mahāyānists also reinterpreted the idea of the two truths, arguing that emptiness is the ultimate truth while relegating even dharmic discourse to mere conventional status. The Yogācārins, as we will see, while fully acknowledging the conventionality of dharmas, nevertheless appreciated and therefore preserved their pragmatic utility—that is, how dharmic analysis helps remedy our tendencies to impute selves and essences. It is this intricate enfolding of layers of (re)interpretation that makes Yogācāra teachings so doctrinally dense: Abhidharmists took the early Buddhist teachings and developed them into systems of dharmic analysis, claiming that dharmas with essences ultimately exist; early Mahāyānists considered those dharmas to be empty and conventional, but then Yogācārins preserved these dharmic analyses albeit as provisional and not ultimate discourse. One of the aims of this chapter is to trace this gradual shift in early Mahāyāna—from deconstructing essences logically to showing how to stop imputing them psychologically. This provides much of the remaining groundwork, in orientation as well as content, for appreciating Yogācāra doctrines in the chapters that follow.

Contemporaneous developments in India no doubt had a large influence on the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Alexander the Great's army arrived at the shores of the Indus River in 326 BCE, strengthening contacts with classical Greek and Persian culture, which contributed to the emerging cosmo-

politan civilization that blossomed under the Mauryan empire in India a mere half a century later. This period saw the rise of temple Hinduism, the development of iconic images within those temples, and new conceptions of the transcendental reality these images embodied.

Preceding this, and contemporaneous with the Buddha, the Upaniṣadic seers conceived of Brahman as the spiritual ground of all Being that both pervades and transcends the phenomenal world—that is, it is both immanent and transcendental. Nevertheless, the yogis associated with these teachings practiced a mendicant lifestyle far removed from the householder life, much like the Buddhist sangha that emerged alongside it. These developments challenged the social and religious order, to which orthodox Hindus responded in ways that parallel Mahāyāna practices. Its basic theme: bringing the fruits of this newfound liberation into the world.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (ca. 200 BCE) classically encapsulated these responses. It declared that householders could attain liberation within this world by practicing two new forms of yoga: by fulfilling their worldly duties without attachment to the fruits of their labor (*karmayoga*), and by selfless devotion to personal forms of Brahman (*bhaktiyoga*). In contrast to the idea of Brahman as transcending all characterizations (*nirguṇa brahman*), it emphasized Brahman *with* attributes or qualities (*saguṇa brahman*). This is a notion of divinity, the *Gītā* argued, that embodied mortals like ourselves could more readily comprehend. Moreover, since Brahman pervades *all* phenomena, any single attribute or quality of the divine just as readily represents, indeed embodies, Brahman as much as a total lack of qualities does. This gave philosophical/theological expression to the new practices of devotion toward human-like images in the emerging traditions we now call temple Hinduism. These tendencies were enhanced by the notion of divine incarnations (*avatāra*), wherein Brahman periodically takes on human forms, such as Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*, in order to both preserve the sacred social order and to lead householders toward liberation in ways they can more readily follow. This set of developments emphasizes religious practice and liberation *within* our human social arena, while emphasizing the presence of the divine in this very world—a definite shift from transcendence to immanence. All of these set the historical, social, and cultural context for Mahāyāna Buddhism, where we find distinct parallels.

First, the historical record evinces some dissatisfaction regarding the figure of the *arhat*, the liberated saints extolled in early Buddhism. There were criticisms that the arhats had merely achieved *individual* liberation (*mokṣa*) and then abandoned this world, unlike the Buddha, who attained full awakening (*bodhi*) but selflessly returned to teach others. More crucially, critics recognized the paradox of seeking liberation for *oneself* while at the same time arguing that self-centeredness is what keeps one trapped in saṃsāra. Critics considered this implicitly selfish.[73]

Early Mahāyānists found a way to forestall this possibility: make the desire to help others the explicit aim of religious practice at the beginning. The Mahāyānists thus encouraged beginning practitioners to cultivate *bodhicitta*, the mind (*citta*) or aspiration to attain awakening not for oneself alone but for the purpose of liberating others. All the practice that follows, summarized in the six perfections (*pāramitā*),[74] would be colored by this initial, selfless intention.

The desire to become awakened in order to extinguish the afflictions of all suffering beings is expressed in the very term Mahāyāna—the "great" or "universal vehicle" that, like a large raft, ferries all beings to the other shore, to nirvāṇa. This contrasts with the narrower aim of seeking liberation for oneself alone, a limited aspiration reflected in the newly coined and pejorative term Hīnayāna, the "small vehicle."[75] In their own eyes, the early Mahāyāna followers were emulating the exalted example of the Buddha as seen in popular Buddhist literature, such as the Jātakas, stories of the lives of the Buddha before he took birth as Gautama in northern India in the fifth century BCE. In these stories, the aspiring Buddha-to-be (the first sense of the term *bodhisattva*) performed numerous acts of generosity and compassion for the sake of other beings, even to the extent of sacrificing his own life. These were qualities of the Buddha that common practitioners could emu-

73. Whether the arhats were actually self-centered in this way is of course impossible to establish; the very definition of an arhat would seem to preclude that. Similar criticisms are found in most contemplative traditions: spiritual pride is the occupational hazard of the spiritual virtuoso.

74. The six are generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), vigor or energy (*vīrya*), concentration or meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*).

75. Narrowly speaking, this term refers to the small scope of one's aim—awakening for oneself—but has often been inappropriately applied to non-Mahāyāna schools as a whole.

late and cultivate in their own aspirations to become bodhisattvas—beings (*sattva*) aimed toward awakening (*bodhi*), the second sense of the term. This aspiration is expressed in the ambitious bodhisattva vow chanted daily throughout Zen traditions:

> Afflictions of sentient beings are inexhaustible; I vow to extinguish them all.
> Sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to save them all.
> The Buddhist practices are immeasurable; I vow to master them all.
> Perfect awakening is incomparable; I vow to perfect it.

In one of the major innovations of Mahāyāna, most famously narrated in the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*), the Buddha was said to have attained awakening eons ago. But like the Hindu idea of an avatar, he voluntarily took rebirth into this world as the historical Śākyamuni, both out of compassion for all beings and to exemplify the possibility of achieving awakening in this life. In this sense, all of his actions were now considered mere *displays* or, to cite another key Mahāyāna concept, *skillful means* (*upāya*), employed to lead beings to the other shore of awakening. Indeed, the body he inhabited during his short life on Earth, his material or *form body* (*rūpakāya*)—in contrast to his *transcendental body* of awakened qualities (*dharmakāya*)[76]—was now termed his *appearance body* (*nirmāṇakāya*). In this sense, the Buddha only *appeared* to take birth, undergo austerities leading to liberation, and attain final extinction (*parinirvāṇa*) at death. Though his transient material body passed on, his *dharma body* still manifested at subtler levels of existence, potentially accessible to those in deep meditation.

In one early meditation, for example, yogis would concentrate on "recollecting" the awakened qualities of the Buddha (*buddha-anusmṛti*) as a

76. The Mahāyāna concept of *dharmakāya* developed out of earlier Buddhist traditions. Gethin (1998, 233) nicely sums up this process: "What a buddha is in 'himself' is the *dharma-kāya*. This expression originally seems to have meant that a buddha is ultimately the sum (*kāya*) of perfected good qualities (*dharma*) that constitute a Buddha. But the expression comes to be interpreted, at any rate in the Yogācāra tradition, as referring to the ultimate truth of the way things are: the eternal, unchanging truth perceived by a buddha, 'thusness' (*tathatā*)." See Makransky 1997 and Xing 2005.

means of developing these qualities within themselves. Occasionally, the Buddha would appear to these yogis in the form of his subtle *visionary body* (*saṃbhogakāya*), which mediates the other two, to teach the Dharma directly from another realm or world system. As the aptly named *Sūtra on the Meditation of the Bodhisattva Who Is Face to Face with the Buddhas of the Present*[77] describes:

> While remaining in this very world-system that bodhisattva sees the Lord, Amitāyus; and conceiving himself to be in that world-system he also hears the Dharma. Having heard their exposition he accepts, masters and retains those Dharmas. He worships, venerates, honours and reveres the Lord . . . After he has emerged from that meditative state (*samādhi*) that bodhisattva also expounds widely to others those Dharmas as he has heard, retained, and mastered them (Harrison 1978, 43).

This passage exemplifies ways in which the Dharma, the authoritative early teachings of the Buddha, remained a relatively flexible category in Mahāyāna. Since the teachings were transmitted orally and not written down for three to four hundred years after the historical Buddha, there was considerable debate over which of these teachings were authentic. It was understood that the orally transmitted discourses did not all come directly from the mouth of the Buddha. Sometimes he invited one of his disciples to give the discourse; at other times he endorsed the teaching or teacher after the fact. But, according to a discourse cited by Śāntideva, the author of the later Mahāyāna classic *Entering the Practice of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*), a teaching is authentic if it accords with the Dharma as already known, if it helps diminish the afflictions, and if it points toward nirvāṇa. It can thus be said to be "well spoken."[78]

Further complicating this complex picture, and reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Indian civilization at the turn of the Common Era, was

77. *Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-bodhisattva-samādhi-sūtra*. An English translation of the 179 CE Chinese translation of Lokakṣema is included in Harrison and McRae 1998.

78. Williams 1989, 31; Gethin 2008, xiii n1.

the popular idea that Śākyamuni Buddha was not the only figure to have become, or aspired to become, a buddha. Since *buddha* is a title referring to a mode of being awakened rather than to a specific individual, it follows that there could be many *bodhisattvas*—beings who aspire and work toward buddhahood—some of whom are currently quite far along the path. Still others were thought to have already attained buddhahood and to reside in other world systems, different parts of this vast, inconceivable multiverse replete with myriad galaxies that Indians were so adept at conceiving. This burgeoning pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas were all considered somehow available to teach and lead all kinds of practitioners toward liberation and awakening.

Thus there appeared on the scene a large number of discourses by buddhas other than Śākyamuni that were accepted by Mahāyānists as equally authentic and efficacious in leading beings toward awakening. Most followers of earlier forms of Buddhism in India—including its only surviving school, the Theravāda, which remains dominant in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia—did not, and do not, accept these new discourses as true *buddhavacana*, "word of the Buddha," not least because they were often written down in Sanskrit, a highly literate medium removed from the spoken style of the early Pāli texts. While modern scholarship based on linguistic evidence confirms the later composition of these new discourses, it also acknowledges that they may well reflect teachings already in circulation for many centuries. Indeed, if one takes the criteria of being commensurate with the Dharma, of eliminating the afflictions, and of leading toward nirvāṇa, then any number of "well-spoken" texts could be acceptable. This attitude facilitated the ongoing appearance of *revealed* scripture over the next two millennia of Buddhism in India and Tibet. In this chapter we will examine the early Mahāyāna texts that focus on the idea of emptiness, especially as it pertains to mind and cognitive processes.

In sum, the early Mahāyāna traditions introduced several key developments that provided the immediate background for the emergence of the Yogācāra. The concept of *bodhicitta* challenged Buddhists to be more explicitly concerned with the welfare of others. This aspiration was personified in the figure of the *bodhisattva*, modeled after the previous lifetimes of the Buddha himself. Similarly, they said the Buddha had awakened eons

ago but voluntarily took rebirth in his emanation body (*nirmāṇakāya*) as Śākyamuni out of compassion for this world. His very life thus exemplifies the notion of skillful means in the service of universal liberation. Moreover, his transcendental dharma body (*dharmakāya*) remained accessible, mediated through the newly conceived visionary body (*saṃbhogakāya*), to those in deep meditation recollecting his virtues, some of whom received and then disseminated new teachings, which Mahāyānists accepted as authentic *buddhavacana*. This opened the gates to a flood of new discourses taught by countless other buddhas and bodhisattvas populating a universe of astronomical proportions. Such is the astounding evolution of this most successful of Indian exports—Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras

Of the numerous Mahāyāna texts from this era, the most relevant for our purposes are the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras. These sūtras vary in length—from a single page to a hundred thousand lines—and were, according to modern scholarship, mostly composed across the Indian subcontinent over several centuries beginning around the turn of the Common Era. Their central theme is the cultivation of wisdom (*prajñā*), the sixth of the six Mahāyāna perfections (*pāramitā*). Wisdom entails not just the liberating insight into the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena but also the affirmation of their conventional, contingent reality. The provocative paradoxes at the core of these texts have challenged and illuminated countless readers ever since, including the famous Sixth Patriarch of Chan, Huineng, who, tradition tell us, was suddenly awakened merely by hearing their wondrous verses. These insights also inspired the earliest stages of what came to be considered the two main schools of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.

Wisdom has been a central theme of Indian yogic traditions since the time of the Upaniṣads and the Buddha. Insight into reality as it truly is, not as we wish it to be, helps us to cut through the illusions that blind us and bind us to our compulsive behavioral patterns. Indeed, the Perfection of

Wisdom sūtra we will examine here, the *Diamond Sūtra*,[79] explains its title in just these terms:

> This sūtra should be called the *Diamond That Cuts through Illusion* because it has the capacity to cut through all illusions and afflictions and bring us to the shore of liberation. (Nhat Hanh 1992, 11)

Let us see how the sūtra does this. Set in a common scene, the Buddha is surrounded by his retinue and questioned by one of his chief disciples, Subhūti, a favorite figure in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, who asks:

> If sons and daughters of good families want to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind,[80] what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking? (3)

The Buddha then expresses this perfect wisdom with an apparent paradox:

> However many species of living beings there are . . . we must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvāṇa so that they can be liberated. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.
>
> Why is this so? If, Subhūti, a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a lifespan exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva. (4)

Here the Buddha first affirms the bodhisattva vow inspired by bodhicitta, the aspiration to awakening so that one may liberate all beings. But then he immediately qualifies this affirmation with a negation: don't hold onto

79. We will mostly rely on the accessible translation of Thich Nhat Hanh (1992), based on Kumārajīva's translation into Chinese, while noting differences with the Sanskrit text edited by Edward Conze (2001). The translation has been slightly modified for terminological consistency and added emphasis.

80. The Chinese reads 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心 (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*). The Sanskrit edition reads *bodhisattvayāna*, "the vehicle of the bodhisattvas."

the idea or notion (*saṃjñā*) that such things as "living beings" actually exist. Why not? Because, the Buddha explains, using the case of *generosity*, the first perfection:

> When a bodhisattva practices generosity, he does not rely on any object—that is to say, he does not rely on any form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object, or dharma—to practice generosity. That, Subhūti, is the spirit in which a bodhisattva should practice generosity, *not relying on signs*. (4)

The Buddha is referring here to the five standard objects of sense perception and to dharmas as objects of mental awareness. But, he warns, bodhisattvas should not rely on the *signs* (*nimitta*) that distinguish one object from another and that constitute the content of our ideas, notions, and apperceptions. Why not? Because:

> In a place where there is something that can be distinguished by signs, in that place there is *deception*. If you can see the signless nature of signs, then you can see the Tathāgata. (5)[81]

These are puzzling statements, are they not? Bodhisattvas should liberate beings who are not beings and give objects that are not objects, while seeing the signlessness of signs. How do we make sense of this?

Refuting essences

First, the Buddha is warning against taking objects at face value, such as a self or a lifespan, as if they were independently existing entities not made up of parts or dependent on conditions. This clearly echoes early Buddhist negations of the unreflective way we tend to view things—that is, it is a negation of our naïve realism. But the *Diamond Sūtra* takes this even further.

As we have seen, the Abhidharmists claimed that they had discerned and

81. The Sanskrit reads *lakṣaṇa*, "marks," instead of *nimitta*, "signs." "Tathāgata" is an epithet for the Buddha: "one who has gone to thusness." This term, ambiguous in Sanskrit, could also be construed as "come from thusness," as it is translated into Chinese: 如来.

expressed the true nature of reality by analyzing apparent substantial entities into their fundamental elements—into their *dharmas*—each of which is defined by its distinctive sign or mark (*nimitta*), characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*), or essence (*svabhāva*). Such signs are traditionally considered the distinguishing mark of objects of apperception (*saṃjñā*), such as the color or taste of something. And when perception is mental rather than sensorial, then its object is a dharma: a thought, idea, or concept, also characterized by its own distinguishing mark.

Here, however, the Buddha says that thinking and acting in terms of such signs or marks is *deceptive*. If we imagine that we have a completely accurate account of all the things that truly exist—each with its own sign, mark, and essence—then we are deceiving ourselves. We imagine we have truly depicted reality just as it is, but this is confusing the map for the territory. In this sense, attachment to our perceptions, our ideas, our maps—even to Buddhist ideas or maps—blinds us to the complex, interdependent reality happening all around.

Thus the Buddha instructs the budding bodhisattvas:

> When a bodhisattva gives rise to the unequaled mind of awakening, he has to give up all ideas (*saṃjñā*). He cannot rely on forms when he gives rise to that mind, nor on sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or objects of mind. He can only give rise to that mind that is not caught up in anything. (13)

This further negation, this renunciation of fixed and limiting ideas, is central to the Mahāyāna critique of concepts. But we should not overstate what is being negated. Buddhism in general is often criticized for negating all individuality and personal identity whatsoever. But what it is arguing is that the idea of *ātman*—that we are or have an unchanging essence as our very identity—is misguided, incoherent, and inevitably leads to more dissatisfaction. It is a critique of the *concept* of *ātman*, not of persons *in toto*. Indeed, they affirm other aspects of provisional identity and agency, such as the continuity of individual karma and rebirth over multiple lifetimes, as well as, crucially, the aspiration and ability to improve and transform ourselves.

The critique of ideas, signs, and language in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras is open to similar misinterpretations. They are critiquing not just

selves and objects but a more sophisticated position that maintains that both the specific *content* of our perceptions and the *concepts* we use to analyze them all have essential natures or fixed definitions. This critique, though, does not mean that such perceptions and concepts are utterly useless. How else could we analyze our experiences and communicate them with others? How else could the Buddha teach?

Avoiding absolute negation, affirming conventional truths

Accordingly, the Buddha doesn't only critique the idea that things have essences; he also warns against trying to destroy or annihilate (*uccheda*) the very means of carrying out and communicating that critique. In the *Diamond Sūtra* he states:

> Subhūti, if you think that the Tathāgata realizes the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind and *does not need to have all the marks*, you are wrong. Subhūti, do not think in that way.
>
> Do not think that when one gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, one needs to see all objects of mind as nonexistent, cut off from life.[82] Please do not think in that way.
>
> One who gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind does not contend that all objects of mind are nonexistent and cut off from life. (22)

This warning echoes earlier Buddhist claims to occupy the middle way between the eternalism of *ātman* and the nihilism of a strictly materialist outlook. The latter is the view that denies there are any long-term consequences of our actions, of our karma; after we die, these consequences are simply cut off, finished.[83]

What then is the status of the speech, the concepts, used in the Buddha's discourses? All such terms, the text states, are matters of conventional discourse; they are neither dharmas nor not dharmas, neither existent nor non-

82. "Life" is Thich Nhat Hanh's felicitous translation of *saṃsāra*, consistent with its use in contemporary South Asian languages.

83. This view is called *ucchedavāda*, "annihilation view," from the same root, *ched*, "to cut," in the title of the *Diamond[-Cutter] Sutra*: *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*.

existent, for reality is ultimately inexpressible (*anabhilāpya*). Only ordinary foolish people hold on to such things (Conze 2001, 65). Therefore,

> the venerable Subhūti replied, "Yes, World-Honored One. It is because the very natures of virtue and happiness are not virtue and happiness that *the Tathāgata is able to speak* about virtue and happiness." (8)

In short, it is because the Buddha does not imagine that words or concepts have an intrinsic nature or meaning that he is able to use them freely and skillfully.

Earlier Buddhists also began by denying an unchanging *ātman* and then went on to conventionally describe the various ways we have personal continuity within the context of unceasing change. Similarly, the *Diamond Sūtra* begins by denying the *ultimate* meaning or referent of all the signs, marks, and essences of ideas and dharmas—the step of negation—but then takes the important next step of *affirming* them conventionally. Indeed, this is the point of the refrain repeated throughout the sūtra:

> What are called all dharmas are, in fact, not all dharmas.
> That is why they are called all dharmas. (17)

What we imagine are independently existing entities with true natures are fabrications, deceptions. When we analyze them, we find that they are dependently arisen phenomena. Similarly, what we imagine are true and accurate maps of reality, couched in the Abhidharma notion of real existents, have no such essential characteristics; they too are dependently arisen phenomena. Once we understand this clearly, we can then provisionally and pragmatically give names to certain phenomena for certain purposes and communicate this through specific, albeit conventional, concepts. "That is why they are called all dharmas."

We may now better appreciate the Buddha's apparently paradoxical formulations: the sequence of naïve realism, followed by its negation, and then an affirmation of the pragmatic utility of conventional teachings. The stage of negation entails the danger of getting "caught up" in deconstruction; if you imagine you are annihilating something truly *real*, you are still "caught up" in its realism. Bodhisattvas, therefore, are

> not caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a lifespan. They are not caught up in the idea of a dharma or the idea of a non-dharma. They are not caught up in the notion that this is a sign and that is not a sign.
>
> Why? If you are caught up in the idea of a dharma, you are also caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a lifespan. If you are caught up in the idea that there is no dharma, you are still caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a lifespan. That is why we should not get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do not exist.
>
> This is the hidden meaning when the Tathāgatha says, "Bhikṣus, you should know that all of the teachings I give to you are a raft." All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non-teachings. (6)

How does the world appear when we are free of these distorting lenses? How does one save beings who are not beings using signs that are not signs, acquiring merit that is not merit, and so forth? One sees the world as evanescent processes, like the cognitive events—the "mere signs"—in early Buddhism and the "momentary flashings" of dharmas in Abhidharma:

> All composed things are like a dream,
> a phantom, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning.
> That is how to meditate on them,
> that is how to observe them. (25)

Nāgārjuna's Explication of Emptiness

While there is little question about the historical influence of these provocative texts, there are questions about their interpretation. To explore these, we will explicate their doctrines in two ways. First, we will examine their interpretation in the work of the illustrious Nāgārjuna, a first-century monk from South India who powerfully influenced later forms of Mahāyāna thought by giving philosophical rigor to the concept of emptiness, thereby demonstrating how explanatorily vacuous essentialism is. We will then examine how our embodied cognitive schemas and concepts (*vikalpa*)

condition us to become naïve realists and innate essentialists in the first place—a view more deeply investigated by the Yogācārins in the centuries following Nāgārjuna and the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, and widely shared by many cognitive scientists.

Before we dive into the arguments of Nāgārjuna's signature treatise, the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: MMK),[84] let's recall that the stated purpose of Buddhist philosophizing is soteriological—it is oriented toward changing how we understand and behave in order to free us from our compulsive behavioral patterns driven by ignorance and attachment. Indian Buddhists argue that if we have either an innate or an acquired view of truly unchanging essence—be it Ātman, Being, or God—then we are both *cognitively* caught in a web of confusion about reality and *affectively* caught in the cycle of grasping after figments of our imagination. Wisdom or insight into reality *as it is*—that things that seem to exist independently only persist dependently—is said to free us from these affective and cognitive obscurations and from the futile and frustrating behaviors they instigate. The role of insight or wisdom is central to these Buddhist goals in general and, obviously, to the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras in particular.

The most effective way to gain this insight, according to some traditions, is through trenchant analyses aimed at uncovering our implicit assumptions about essences, painstakingly examining them until we come to realize—at first verbally and conceptually but then viscerally and directly—that nothing we are familiar with could *possibly function* if it were indeed an unchanging essence. The very idea of unchanging essences prevents us from making sense of the world we live in; it is our most deep-seated cognitive obscuration. We need to realize instead, Mahāyānists argue, that all phenomena are precisely *empty* of such essences. This is the first and fundamental meaning of emptiness: to be devoid of any essence or essential self-nature.

Thus, in addition to the early Buddhist *selflessness of selves*, Mahāyānists now also posit the *selflessness of dharmas*. So defined, emptiness becomes

84. We have mostly relied on the translation in Garfield's seminal *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (1995) and to a lesser degree on the more philologically oriented translation from the Sanskrit in Siderits and Katsura 2013. As before, some terminology has been slightly modified. Verses are cited by chapter and verse numbers.

the central doctrine of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, if not of Mahāyāna in general.

The middle way—in short

Nāgārjuna famously equates emptiness with dependent arising. Things are empty—they have no unchanging essences—because they arise in dependence on other things, and because essences, as Nāgārjuna *defines* them in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, neither change nor come into being:[85]

> Essence arising from
> causes and conditions makes no sense.
> If an essence came from causes and conditions,
> then it would be fabricated.
>
> How could it be appropriate
> for a fabricated essence to come to be?
> Essence itself is not artificial
> and does not depend on another. (15.1–2)

Here, Nāgārjuna first refutes the idea that independent essences are able to function in a nexus of causes and conditions. Nevertheless—echoing the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras—he *affirms* the need for conventional truths, and thus for provisional doctrines, to get beings to the other shore:

> Without a foundation in customary discourse (*vyavahāra*)
> the ultimate truth cannot be taught.
> Without understanding the ultimate truth,
> liberation is not achieved. (24.10)

Realizing this leads to the famed middle way, from which the school he inspired centuries later—Madhyamaka—takes its name:

> Whatever is dependently arisen

85. See Havelock 1983, 14, for a similar definition in early Greek thought: "*They are not born that way or become or are made so.*"

is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
is itself the middle way. (24.18)

We will now examine the logical route that Nāgārjuna takes to get us to the insights enshrined in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and the summary just presented.

What is not an essence?

Recall the example of a river from the first chapter. A *river* refers to a stream of water flowing within a relatively stable location, persisting over a span of time. We give a name to that persisting pattern of events. But no single aspect of the river is truly unchanging, nor does it exist independently of the others, neither of the riverbed nor even of the fact of gravity itself. Nevertheless, we can indicate both its continuity and its distinctiveness—we don't mistake the Nile for the Ganges—without positing an unchanging essence.

It is even less tenable to posit an unchanging essence in something that is alive. Anything with a metabolism is a bundle of interactive processes in motion—recurrent patterns of motion to be sure, but motion nevertheless. Moreover, we know from evolutionary biology that plants and animals do not represent instances of some unchanging archetype, some *species essence*, as most ancient Greeks and Hindus thought. Rather, the endless variety of living forms on Earth have gradually come about, and continue to evolve, through ceaselessly interacting with their physical and social environments, which includes their DNA.[86]

This is consistent with the basic idea of dependent arising: that all phenomena arise and persist in dependence on causes and conditions, and that the structures of our current embodiment are the results of past processes. So where among our metabolic processes would this unchanging *ātman* be? Where among our constantly shifting thoughts and feelings? If we subtract

86. DNA molecules are constantly yet imperfectly replicating themselves within the cells of an organism. They do not represent unchanging "essences" but illustrate processes of change within continuity. According to Ernst Mayr (1988, 15), modern biology developed with the rejection of unchanging species essences.

everything that is clearly changing and dependent on other processes, what is left?

Most of us are tempted to answer "Me!"—the part of me that is most essential when all the extraneous other stuff is stripped away. But, Buddhists argue that, like an onion, there is no core. Other than the five aggregates, the parts and processes that constitute my body-mind continuum, there is no *me*. Of course, these parts and processes have a functional unity and comprise an identifiable organism that persists for a while, to which we conveniently give a name, a dependent designation. But neither the organism nor its functional unity is an unchanging essence. To expect something more reflects an assumption that the names we use necessarily refer to really existing, unitary things—that is, unchanging essences—and are not simply useful ways to refer to the aggregation of a thing's parts or processes. When we examine things carefully, however, all we ever find are more parts and processes, more patterns of interaction—all the way down.

Karma without essences: Avoiding the two extremes

So far, these analyses have focused on why the notion of essences cannot explain how beings function and persist in a world of flux and interaction, much as we saw in early Buddhism. Nāgārjuna's genius, though, was to demonstrate the problems that would arise if there truly *were* unchanging essences. Although these analyses aptly apply to similar ideas in other traditions, we will focus on the context in which it arose: Hindu-Buddhist debates. He states rather bluntly:

> If you perceive the existence of all things
> in terms of their essences,
> then this perception of all things
> will be without causes and conditions.
>
> Effects and causes
> and agent and action
> and conditions and arising and ceasing
> and fruit will be rendered impossible (24.16–17).

The reason for this:

> If there is essence, the whole world
> will be unarising, unceasing,
> and static. The entire phenomenal world
> would be immutable. (24.38)

Let's consider what underlies these statements, for they are clearly the opposite of what most essentialists think. Hindu thinkers routinely criticized Buddhists for rejecting Ātman on the grounds that without an unchanging, unitary, and essential identity there would be no karma, no moral responsibility based on cause and effect. The person who performed the action would not be the same one who experienced the result and could therefore act with impunity. Buddhists, in this specific sense, they argue, are nihilists (*nāstivāda*). This is a common criticism that eternalists or absolutists—those who argue that an unchanging, eternal, absolute reality is the basis of all existence and morality—have directed toward Buddhists, and other nontheists or atheists, to this day. Nāgārjuna brilliantly turns the tables on them and asks: If we really were an *ātman*, then how could there *possibly be* karma, or any moral consequences, since these are based on causes and effects? If they were not based on our actions, then what would they be based on?

This is not a peripheral concern to Indian religion; karma is a core concept. The doctrine of karma claims that our intentional actions have consequences, reflecting causal relationships in a moral dimension: based on previous actions we will experience commensurate results at a later time. Understanding the results of our negative actions, and working to remedy the behaviors that perpetuate them, is behind the initial impetus to spiritual practice in the many yogic traditions of India. But they disagreed deeply on how all this works.

Ātman, in the Hindu view, is what we truly are; it neither changes nor depends on conditions. But, the Buddhists note, if it does not change, then it cannot act, since actions are temporal events that start and stop. Nor could it act independently of all causes and conditions, since actions depend on bodily or mental processes. Nor could an unchanging *ātman* experience

the *results* of an action, since a result is also a temporal event that a person experiences. In short, both actions and the results they lead to are dependent, temporal processes, and an unchanging *ātman* could neither perform nor experience either of them. Hence, an *ātman* that is *truly* unchanging and independent has *nothing to do with* karma defined in terms of cause and effect. It stands outside of time and causality. Thus it is the notion of an *ātman* that cannot explain karma or moral consequences, for whom causes and effects "will be rendered impossible." So, Nāgārjuna argues, it is they, the essentialists, who are the nihilists.[87]

The two extremes as mutually entailing

There is an important lesson here: those who claim that an unchanging self is the indispensable basis for moral life end up arguing for a concept of identity that is so removed from any causal conditions that it cannot explain karma. Ironically, positing an eternal, unchanging entity as the foundation of reality and morality leads to a kind of nihilism—a view that denies or precludes the possibility of causality in a moral dimension.[88] What the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism have in common is that they both deny or downplay how inextricably implicated we are in causal relations: the first by positing our true identity as an unchanging, unitary, acausal essence; and the second by discounting (at least karmic) causal continuity over time. Ironically, they end up being two sides of the same coin.[89]

87. The Hindu term we often translate as "nihilist" (*nāstivāda*) means "those who maintain [Ātman does] not exist," which is an ontological question. In contrast, the Buddhist term we often translate as nihilist (or annihilationist), *ucchedavāda*, "those who maintain that [karmic effects] are cut off," refers to causal continuity. They are talking, as often happens, in different registers.

88. Rebecca Solnit (2016; emphasis added) has brilliantly delineated how essentialism—what she calls the ideology of isolation—entails *both* extremes: "What keeps the ideology of isolation going is going to extremes. If you begin by denying social and ecological systems, then you end in denying the reality of facts, which are after all part of a network of *systematic relationships* between language, physical reality, and the record, regulated by the rules of evidence, truth, grammar, word meaning, and so forth. You deny the *relationship between cause and effect*, evidence and conclusion. And this is how the ideology of isolation becomes nihilism, trying to kill the planet and most living things on it with the confidence born of total disconnection."

89. We see this in the modern West as well. After the absolutist morality of Catholicism was rejected, at least in educated circles, many Western thinkers either rejected the notion

Nāgārjuna identifies this profound but tragic dynamic in one of the early discourses of the Buddha, which we saw in the first chapter:

> The Victorious One, through knowledge
> of reality and unreality,
> in the *Discourse to Kātyāyana*,
> refuted both "it is" and "it is not." . . .
>
> To "say it is" is to grasp for permanence.
> To say "it is not" is to adopt the view of nihilism.
> Therefore a wise person
> does not say "exists" or "does not exist."
>
> "Whatever exists through its essence
> cannot be nonexistent" is eternalism.
> "It existed before but doesn't now"
> entails the error of nihilism. (15.7, 15.10–11)

The concept of an essential *ātman* is problematic in more practical ways as well. If our basic identity were truly unchanging and unaffected by our actions and their consequences, then it would be impossible to learn from our mistakes. Moral improvement would not only be unnecessary; it would be impossible. As Nāgārjuna notes:

> If there are no effects, liberation and
> paths to higher realms will not exist.
> So all activity
> would be without purpose. (8.6)

We also see something similar in hierarchical social systems around the world. Their advocates argue that people who belong to specific

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of morality altogether, resulting in nihilism, or tried to impose an absolutist morality based on unrestrained power, i.e., fascism and communism. See the brilliant analysis of this interplay between eternalism and nihilism in modern Western political thought and history in Camus's *The Rebel*.

categories—racial, ethnic, social, or gender groups—not only possess essential, immutable characteristics, but the hierarchy based on them is claimed to be fixed once and for all, as if God-given. Our actions cannot change it; it is God's will, not ours. As a result, those in superior positions believe they can act with impunity, without suffering any consequences, while those who are marginalized are taught to passively accept their fate.[90]

Now, Hindu thinkers readily acknowledge that causality occurs among those aspects of ourselves that are not *ātman*, and that are affected by actions and their results. After all, they too argue for rebirth driven by karma. But, Buddhists ask: what then does the concept of *ātman* actually *explain*? What is the purpose of positing an unchanging substratum of our being that is not involved in actions or their results? To paraphrase Wittgenstein, if the wheel does not move with the rest of the machine, then it is not part of the mechanism (Wittgenstein 1953, 271).

Nāgārjuna therefore argues that it is precisely *because* we are dependently arisen, because we are beings in process who experience continuity and change in our streams of *citta*, that we do indeed perform actions that lead to consequences that we—that is, our succeeding streams of *citta*—will subsequently experience. We all live, in effect, downstream from our previous actions. It is being empty of an unchanging self-identity that *affirms* karmic continuity and moral responsibility. This is why Nāgārjuna triumphantly claims, in contrast to the immutable reality posited by the eternalists, that it is emptiness that best explains causality:

> For him to whom emptiness is clear,
> everything becomes clear.
> For him to whom emptiness is not clear,
> nothing becomes clear (24.14).

Why Essences Are Explanatorily Vacuous

Nāgārjuna does not stop here. His critique of essentialism extends to the essential *characteristics* we imagine things have. His analyses criticize what is

90. Formulated in discussion with Robin Wells. See Bista 1991 and Wilkerson 2020.

called *substance-attribute metaphysics*, which lies at the heart of most traditional Hindu and Greek philosophies.

Briefly, essentialists seek to understand our world by distinguishing the "deeper," underlying nature of phenomena from their more transient, superficial characteristics. The solidity of rocks persists even if a particular rock is destroyed; animate objects are essentially different than inanimate ones; and my underlying character traits persist regardless of my temporary lapses in judgment. In this way, they distinguish between something's *substance* or essence and its contingent *attributes*. Its unchanging essence defines what or who something essentially and primarily is, while its changing attributes are merely accidental and secondary.

Essentialism and its close cousin, substance-attribute metaphysics, rest upon cognitive mechanisms we all share. Cognitive scientists argue that we have deep-seated intuitions that the essences underlying things are *more real* than their changing, accidental attributes.[91] These intuitions are so strong that we immediately, automatically, and mostly unconsciously experience things in terms of essences (Gazzaniga 2008, 247ff.). Thus, even though essentialism has been rejected in scientific and social scientific disciplines—precisely because essences don't change or interact—it still permeates our assumptions and ways of thinking about the world. Hence, Nāgārjuna's critiques of essentialism in the first century are just as relevant in the twenty-first.

Nāgārjuna argues that just as essentialism at an ontological level cannot explain how things interact in a world of flux and change, neither can the idea that there are immutable substances or qualities underlying the ever-changing attributes of things—however appealing or intuitive this may be.

Say, for example, that the unchanging essence or substance of a chair—its *chairness*—endures, even though the attributes or qualities of any specific chair—it's being red or blue or short or tall or metal or wood—will vary or change. How would we distinguish the true, independent essence

91. "Much of our mental life rests on an understanding that there are two ways to chop up the world, as it appears and as it really is . . . We have a particular way of thinking about objects whereby we ascribe to them a nature that transcends their appearance. This way of thinking was described by John Locke: 'The real internal, but generally . . . unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their *essence*'" (Bloom 2005, 44–46).

of something from its secondary, incidental attributes? This is, after all, what an essence requires: some definitive quality that differentiates a chair's essence from its attributes—as well as from the essences of all other things.

The problem is that any quality we might use to define it will not be truly distinctive; it can always be found somewhere else: we also sit on logs, tables also have legs, and so on. Moreover, any *definition* of its "essential" nature would have to be expressed in words or concepts in a specific language, whose meanings are relative to other words and concepts in that language, which are used differently by different speakers, which change over time, and so on. We cannot *define* its distinguishing characteristics without relying on such transient, contingent terms. Any truly "essential" characteristic, it seems, would have to *lack any specific semantic content*.

But if its essence or substance were truly independent of all conventional attributes, how *could* we characterize its essential nature? What would a chair be without any characteristics of a chair? What would constitute its *chairness*? And if we do not have some characteristic or quality to distinguish and define it, how could we ever identify it *as* a chair—as opposed to, say, a bench or a stool? In the quest to find its independent and essential "substance," we lose any semantic or conceptual description of its chairness. And without this, we would be unable to distinguish *this* ineffable chairness from other, similarly ineffable, essences.

In short, the explanatory work an essence is supposed to be doing—defining something's unchanging and distinctive "nature"—is undercut by its claim to be wholly independent of any contingent attributes. It is thus an *empty* essence, one lacking any distinguishing characteristics that tell us what it "truly" is. It is, in the end, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Deconstructing perception

When Buddhists analyze the processes of perception or agency, they typically discern the components of these processes, describe what they are, and examine how they interact. Essentialist thinkers, by contrast, posit an essential agent who is *essentially independent* of her changing states, her actions, and the objects of those actions. This immediately raises the same problems we saw with the idea of *chairness*. Just as one who paints is called a painter, someone who sees is a "see-er." If the see-er, though, were *essentially*

a see-er—if it were her independent essence to be a see-er—then being a see-er would not logically depend on her actually seeing anything, because that would make her essential nature *dependent* on, not *in*dependent of, actual conditions. So, to be consistent, an essentialist must argue that she would be a see-er even without ever seeing any object.

But, Nāgārjuna asks, if the see-er exists independently of seeing an object, how would an object actually be seen? He argues that one would need *another* see-er who does the actual seeing—that is, one who actually participates in the cognitive process of seeing, which of course involves interaction and change. But if that additional see-er were also an *essential* see-er, then she too would still be a see-er independent of actually seeing an object (Garfield 1995, 137) and so on—inviting an infinite regress. Similarly, if she were a see-er independently of actually seeing an object, why would we call her a *see-er* in the first place? In short, as long as we posit unchanging essences, which are *by definition* removed from causal interaction, we can't avoid these hopeless conundrums. As Nāgārjuna dryly observes:

> Seeing itself does not see.
> Nonseeing itself does not see . . .
> If there is no seer,
> how can there be seeing or the seen? (3.5–6)

The conclusion should be obvious. As Garfield (1995, 139) neatly notes: "We don't need to posit an entity . . . over and above the set of interdependent phenomena that subserve vision." This not only echoes early Buddhist analyses of the interdependence of the sense faculties and their objects but, as we will see, it also adumbrates the Yogācāra critique of our tendencies toward imputing essences, the *imagined nature*, which are remedied by seeing their *dependent nature*.

Deconstructing action

The same conundrums occur when we imagine that an agent or actor is *essentially* an actor, independently of performing any specific action. An essential actor that does not change could not perform any specific action, since an action is a temporal process with a beginning and an end, and the actor would have to change to perform such an act. Moreover, an essential

actor is—by definition—not dependent on performing any action. In that case, who would be the actor of that action? Thus, as with the see-er, we end up with an essential actor who does not act and an action without an actor. This is not a particularly functional explanation. As Nāgārjuna notes:

> Action depends upon the actor.
> The actor itself depends on action.
> One cannot see any way
> to establish them differently. (8.12)

In one sense, Nāgārjuna is simply drawing out the implications of Sanskrit grammar, in which different parts of speech—subjects, verbs, objects, and so on—are derived from a single root, much like in English: a painter paints a painting; a builder builds a building. But this does not entail, Nāgārjuna argues, that the referents of those parts of speech are *truly existing* entities. To imagine that the referents of words are essences that exist independently of the interactive processes in which they operate is to be enchanted by language, by the spell of our own grammatical categories, which implicitly inform most of our explicit metaphysical systems. As Wittgenstein happily put it, this is when thinking goes on holiday.

Such distinctions are useful at the conventional level, to be sure, but insofar as substance-attribute metaphysics takes substances as unchanging essences, as ultimate, real entities, then such essences can be neither coherently defined nor clearly connected to the changing attributes or dynamic processes they are thought to be involved with. And to this extent, they give us no analytical purchase, no explanatory insight, into the interactive processes they were devised to explain. As Nāgārjuna clearly shows, this approach is another conceptual cul-de-sac.

Deconstructing causation

Crucially, Nāgārjuna applies these analyses to causality. Causality lies at the core of the Indian Buddhist worldview—our actions matter precisely because there are no unchanging essences. Causality also lies at the heart of the Buddha's affirmative message—since it is our actions that cause us to suffer, we can stop them through our own efforts.

So what is a cause, and how do we know one when we see it? This should

be simple. I push the ball and it rolls. I scream at my kids and they cry—and then I suffer, too. My actions bring about these results. But can we isolate the *real cause* here, to which responsibility can be attributed and possible solutions directed? As with the referents of other words, when we call something a *cause*, we tend to essentialize it as such, to conceive of it as an inherently existing cause that exists independently of conditions. But could a tuberculosis germ, for example, be the cause of tuberculosis independently of the specific kind of body it infects? Could it infect a table? Could it infect itself? Can we even make sense of the notion *cause* independently of the notion *effect*?

Nāgārjuna notes that if *cause* refers to a truly unchanging essence, it would be causing in the same way forever and ever; that's what *unchanging* means. But a cause that is forever the same would not give us a handle on how specific actions lead to specific results. More crucially, if a cause is a cause *by its very nature*, then it would not depend on actually causing any result; that's what *independent* means. But without a result, in what sense would it be a cause? The usual definition of a cause is something that brings about an effect, but without some relation to an effect, what would make it a cause?

Much the same kind of problem arises with the idea that a *result* has an inherent essence. It would have to be forever *resulting* since that would be its permanent, unchanging nature. But then it would have no relationship to any specific cause, since *being a result* is its independent nature. And without a relationship with a cause, what would make it a result? As Nāgārjuna concludes: thinking in terms of essences disregards causes and conditions, and agents and action, and thereby renders the very idea of causality incoherent (24.16–17).

In the end, our search for the essential identities of things not only does little to explain phenomena, it actively hinders our ability to make sense of a world of flux and interaction.

The Two Truths: Emptiness and Conventional Concepts

These deconstructive analyses seem to have reached an impasse: if everything is empty and has no intrinsic existence or essential meaning, then how can we know or explain anything? The answer is alluded to in the *Diamond Sūtra*'s cryptic refrain "A dharma is not a dharma; therefore it is a dharma."

Nāgārjuna, though, wants to show how these formulations make sense *logically*. He does this by first reformulating the Abhidharma notion of the two truths.

As we have seen, not unlike the essentialists, Abhidharmists sought to discern the *real* or *true* essence of a dharma, that which marks it off from other phenomena. They claimed, moreover, that while compounded phenomena are provisional and contingent—that is, *conventional*—the dharmas that comprise them are irreducible and real—that is, *ultimate*. But, as Nāgārjuna has clearly demonstrated, it makes little sense to consider any single dharma as having its own-being or own-characteristic, independent of all other dharmas. Therefore, he concludes, all dharmas are *empty* of such unchanging essences or characteristics. Like everything, they are dependently arisen and dependently designated. And if dharmas are empty of essence, they cannot be ultimate after all. They may provide useful models for describing, analyzing, and working with phenomena, but they cannot be ultimate realities precisely because they depend on causes and conditions. Ultimately, all phenomena, even dharmas, are empty.

This is the early Mahāyāna version of the two truths: the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) that everything is empty, and the conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) that consists of all conventional names and concepts—even the Buddhist ones that were devised to help us understand and ameliorate suffering. "All Dharma teachings are a raft" the early sūtras declare and the *Diamond Sūtra* reiterates, not something to be grasped.

However, this does not mean that conventional truth is the same as conventional falsehood, nor that conventional truth is to be dispensed with altogether. Quite the contrary. Nāgārjuna *affirms* the necessity of conventional truth for leading people to a realization of the ultimate truth of emptiness. This affirmation of conventional truth following upon the negation of independent essences is the philosophical expression of the last part of the *Diamond Sūtra* refrain: "*Therefore* it is called a dharma." This is classically stated in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*:

> The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
> is based on two truths:
> a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand
the distinction drawn between these two truths
do not understand
the Buddha's profound truth.

Without a foundation in customary discourse (*vyavahāra*),[92]
the ultimate truth cannot be taught.
Without understanding the ultimate truth,
liberation is not achieved. (24.8–10)

Let's recall the broader significance of this. Traditional essentialist philosophies typically claim that the only reliable foundation for morality is the absoluteness of Ātman, Brahman, or God, the denial of which, they insist, can only result in nihilism, the view that actions have no moral consequences. What Nāgārjuna has shown, though, is that causality entails both *temporality* and *relationality*, the first two marks of existence: impermanence and selflessness. And these can only be established through conventional means—not by discerning unchanging essences but by identifying the *patterns of interaction* through which things arise—that is, their dependent arising.

Nāgārjuna therefore argues that if we merely negate absolute essences without at the same time affirming causal relationships, we cannot account for the consequences of our actions—and this effectively amounts to nihilism (*ucchedavāda*). Thus, like the *Diamond Sutra*, Nāgārjuna warned against the danger of a one-sided negation.

By misunderstanding emptiness
a person of little intelligence is destroyed,
like a snake incorrectly seized
or a spell incorrectly cast. (24.11)

92. Siderits and Katsura (2013, 274) define *vyavahāra*: "The 'customary ways of talking and thinking' (*vyavahāra*) referred to here are the everyday practice of ordinary people, what we think of as 'common sense' . . . As the basis of our commonsense belief, it can be equated with conventional truth."

Merely negating essences without affirming causal interactions would be like stopping in the middle of the *Diamond Sūtra* refrain, "A dharma is *not* a dharma."[93] Nāgārjuna's response—reflecting the rest of the refrain, "therefore it *is* a dharma"—affirms conventional truths as the middle way between eternalism and nihilism.

Conventional truths and conceptual imputations

We need, therefore, to carefully examine the notions of conventional truth and dependent designation, and the complex role that concepts (*vikalpa*) play in our understanding and perception of the world. For although concepts help shape and mediate all ordinary knowledge, and hence usually prevent us from seeing things *as they are*, Nāgārjuna, like the *Diamond Sūtra* before him, claims that we can only find our way to liberation by means of conventional truths—which are admittedly mere designations (*prajñapti*) dependent on customary usage.

As Siderits and Katsura (2013, 272) describe it, drawing upon one of Nāgārjuna's most influential Indian commentators, Candrakīrti, conventional truth can be described as "a set of beliefs that ordinary people (*loka*) use in their daily conduct. And it is conventional (*saṃvṛti*) because of its reliance on conventions concerning semantic and cognitive relations." Extending this point, Garfield explains that "for Nāgārjuna . . . all conventional phenomena are conceptually designated, depending for whatever identity and existence they have on such designation." That is to say, things only acquire "their identity as particulars *through conceptual imputation*" (Garfield 1995, 102 and 221; emphasis added).

This focus on conventional concepts and designations throws us back, once again, onto our cognitive processes as the locus of misunderstanding and reification. The core problem is our deep-seated propensity to impute essences where, upon analysis, all we find are interactive processes. Thus, after all the rigorous analyses deconstructing essences, the problem remains

93. This is arguably where much of postmodern thought remains: it has incisively negated the absolutist notion of essences, noting that phenomena are "constructed" (as if that means false). But it does not seem to have positively articulated how such constructions are embedded in webs of causality nor, importantly, in moral responsibility—that is, how we experience the consequences of our actions. Insofar as this remains unarticulated—"under-theorized"—postmodern thought remains open to the charge of moral nihilism.

more *psycho*logical than logical: it is our understanding that obscures the way things are. As the *Diamond Sūtra* says, we get "caught up in the idea (*saṃjñā*) of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span . . . [as well as] in the idea of a dharma or the idea of a non-dharma." Or, in Nāgārjuna's more precise terms: "Actions and defilements arise because of conceptualizations (*vikalpa*). Those arise from conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*)."[94]

Thus the key question becomes: Why are we so ready to impute unchanging selves and entities, essences, and marks, onto a dynamic, interactive world of flux and becoming? The short answer: Because we are *enchanted* by our categories and concepts, by the products of that most distinctive human ability—to symbolize and share our worlds through language. *Vikalpa*,[95] roughly "concept" or "conceptualization," is central to this. We all work to make sense of our lives by distinguishing one thing from another, *this* from *that* (the sense of the prefix *vi-* in *vikalpa*). And in the process we tend to reify our pragmatic categories, imagining that the names and concepts we devise in order to survive refer to substantially real entities that exist independently of ourselves and our categories. Even Vasubandhu had to warn his fellow Abhidharmists not to cling to the *metaphor* of dharmas as agents, such as "the eye sees and consciousness discerns," which we all too easily superimpose upon the agentless patterns of interaction outlined in the formula of dependent arising.

Cognitive scientists have reached similar conclusions. Even if we are convinced by the strength and cogency of contemporary critiques of essentialism, why do we still find it so easy, so natural, to fall back on unchanging essences for our default explanations? Psychologist Paul Bloom's answer resonates with the Yogācāra program that followed in the wake of Nāgārjuna's trenchant critiques:

> [Our essentialist] assumptions about how the physical world works are so entrenched and unconscious that it takes some effort to articulate them. Indeed, one of the main goals of psychology

94. Siderits and Katsura 2013, 197; modified.

95. *Vikalpa* is comprised of the root *klṛp*, being "well ordered or regulated; well managed." Nominal formations include: "formed, framed; caused, produced, effected, invented, contrived, created." Together with the prefix *vi-*, *vikalpa* then suggests "contrivance, false notion, fancy, imagination; calculation, mental occupation, thinking" (SED). See also Kachru 2020.

> and philosophy is to define our most basic assumptions, to make explicit our naïve metaphysics, our understanding of the fundamental nature of reality (Bloom 2005, 5).

This is much the same task the early Mahāyānists undertook some twenty centuries ago: to explicate our naïve metaphysics, our entrenched and largely unconscious assumptions about essences, and to show the shortcomings of taking these innate assumptions at face value—both the logical conundrums they create and the psychological entanglements they induce.

The Janus face of concepts

The role of conventions and concepts, therefore, remains deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, as Nāgārjuna states, our "karma and afflictions arise because of conceptualizations (*vikalpa*)" arising from our tendency toward conceptual proliferation. On the other hand, without the truth of worldly convention, "without a foundation in customary discourse, the ultimate truth cannot be taught" (24.10). We are ensnared by the same conceptual constructs we need for liberation.

Once again, Bloom and other cognitive scientists have identified a similar dilemma. On the one hand, "Our minds evolved to put things into categories," without which "nothing can be generalized or learned" (Bloom 2005, 39):

> Without a concept "object," there would be no understanding of the physical world; without "person" and "friend" and "self" and "other," there would be no sense of the social world. Without concepts, we are helpless (41).

On the other hand, it is our *folk psychology*—a common term in cognitive science that is nearly an exact equivalent of *loka-saṃvṛti*, "worldly convention"—that informs our unreflective understanding of the world, that endlessly and automatically proliferates essences and agents. Even though the scientific consensus is that essentialism is "invalid" if not incoherent, in folk psychology "all categories are believed to have essences" (55 and 49).

Can it be both, that concepts are helpful and necessary but terribly mislead us, that the angel on one shoulder is the *same* as the devil on the other?

Considering the crucial, and mostly negative, role that conceptualization plays in Buddhist thought in general and, as we will see, in Yogācāra thought in particular, let's consider how concepts work starting at their basic level.

To survive, all beings need to distinguish one thing from another. Single-celled organisms let nutrients pass through their cell walls while fending off other, more toxic, substances. This primitive categorization occurs biochemically and (most likely) without conscious intent. As organisms become more complex, so does their means of distinguishing what is beneficial from what is harmful. Depending on their structure, our sense faculties respond to certain kinds of stimuli and not to others—indeed, they virtually define what counts as their respective stimuli. And our faculties respond *categorically*: we experience pitches as high or low, wavelengths as red or blue, and so forth. Experientially, these stimuli come *already structured.*

With development, these proto-categorizations become slowly structured into our entire nervous system. New sensory stimuli impinging on the sense faculties interact with neurological networks that have been gradually formed through experience, enabling "objects" to be quickly recognized; apperception (*saṃjñā*), we recall, is the *recognition* of signs or marks (*nimitta*). This occurs so fast and so automatically we don't see it happening. We neither choose nor even notice such categorization. We only experience its products, which appear as *given* rather than constructed.

Linguistic categories operate in both similar and dissimilar ways. At one level, they function as simple and pragmatic tools for distinguishing things in our natural and social environments. They, too, function in dependence on neurologically embedded categories formed through experience, which also operate mostly unconsciously and automatically. We cannot choose to *not* understand words in our native language. Nor can we readily recognize how much our vocabulary and syntax shape our worldview, especially if we are monolingual and monocultural.

On the other hand, linguistic categories differ from sensory categories in several respects. First, they are constructed by human beings. Religious claims notwithstanding (Eco 1997), linguistic science admits no exclusively *true* language. All languages have come about by human beings communicating with each other and have evolved through time and diffusion, endlessly spawning creative new forms. Languages are a function of human

social interaction. We did not pluck them out of the sky ready-made. Nor do words contain meaning by themselves—it is human beings who convey meaning by using words (a simple but easily overlooked point).[96] Moreover, words do not convey meaning in isolation; they do not only require social context, they also require syntax. The meaning of words is a function of their relation to other words in sentences, and in relation to other words in the same language, which may or may not overlap in meaning: this is particularly obvious comparing color words across different languages. In all these ways, language and concepts are deeply context dependent: they arise through extended human social interaction and evolve in relation to people's needs; they have a history and a genealogy; and the meanings of words, names, and concepts are systemically related to both the syntax and the lexicon of their respective languages, not to mention variations in social usage.

It is all too easy, though, to imagine that names refer to specific things or specific qualities with a one-to-one correspondence. We use them that way all the time: "The *leaves* on the *maple tree* are turning bright *red*." But this is subtly misleading in several ways. Names imply a more complete unity than we can actually find. The tree, for example, has parts and interacts with the environment. Something made of parts is not an absolute unity but at best a functional one. As we saw with the five aggregates and the self, the apparent whole is just that—more apparent than real. Names also imply fixed boundaries between things, as if they were actually separate from their supporting context. But a tree couldn't live without the photosynthesis that occurs in the leaves, nor without water and nutrients coming from the sky and the soil. At what point exactly does a photon or a molecule of water or nitrogen stop being part of the *environment* and start becoming part of the *tree*? Names also imply duration: calling something the same thing every day focuses on the parts that persist instead of those that change. Is a tree trunk more the *tree* than the leaves are just because the leaves fall off every year?

We also easily imagine that names refer to specific things: *that* chair, *this* book. But only proper names refer to individual things; most names are class nouns. When we call something a *book*, we have selected or abstracted some of its aspects from a large range of possible ones—its collection of

96. See Searle 1995, 222–26, on why computers don't compute, humans do—using computers.

fiber and ink, its potential use as a doorstop or kindling—and associated it with similar qualities in other things. The term *chair* or *book* is therefore a category, an abstraction. This is true for all nouns, not just obvious abstractions like *truth, justice,* and the *American Way*. This is simply how nouns work. Whenever we open our mouths or think in language—even before that, since linguistic categories influence our perceptual processes (Nisbett 2003)—we are necessarily dealing in abstractions and generalizations, not in concrete particulars.

And it's a good thing we do, because, as Bloom argued, we couldn't function if we didn't. Imagine if we had a proper name for *each and every* thing or quality we wanted to talk about. How would we know what we were referring to? Any terms we might use to refer to it—that soft, round, red thing over there—would be just more categories, more abstractions. It is, therefore, not just practical, but *essential* to use shorthand methods to refer to the commonalities we wish to share with others—that is, to use the abstractions of names and concepts. We couldn't communicate much about our world or each other if we didn't.

But this also means that we depend on words and concepts as, in effect, mental extensions of our senses, without which we could not know the world. As we saw in early Buddhism, the *world* (*loka*) we experience is correlative with—a function of—our ways of construing the world. Just as we only experience the *products* of our sense faculties, without realizing how much those products are constructed by our faculties, so too we typically experience the products of our names, concepts, and syntax without noticing how much they are constructed by our implicit categorizations. And these, of course, operate at multiple levels simultaneously—physiologically, psychologically, socially, culturally, and politically.

This is what Buddhists and others mean when they say that *our world* is a product of our constructive processes, of looking through the lens of our categories. This is not a claim that the "objective" universe is constructed by humans or that there was absolutely nothing in space prior to the advent of human language. Rather, it is making the epistemological point that our knowledge of the world is necessarily constrained by our means of knowing. These are *our* worlds, with *our* objects, reflecting *our* concerns. As Garfield (1995, 251) interprets Nāgārjuna in *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*:

"Independent of conceptual imputation there are no objects, no identities, and so, no distinctions."

So, while names and concepts are necessary for our distinctively human forms of knowledge (we share other, more visceral, modes of knowing with other organisms), we are still fundamentally misled by them. Like our sense faculties, concepts help construct a world that *appears* to be something it is not—we and the "things" in the world appear to have essences, identities, which cannot be found upon analysis. Like Dr. Frankenstein, we are haunted, or enchanted, or both, by the products of our own creation.

This is the paradox we labor under. The very tools by which we know the world are the same tools by which we are blinded. And this suggests two possibilities, which are more psychological than ontological. Insofar as we imagine that the products of our cognitive processes—the sense objects, the abstractions of names and selves, their essences—are what truly "exist" in the world, then we are indeed blinded. The essences of folk psychology, folk biology, and so forth, do not withstand analysis.[97] And we can never get to the bottom of things because whenever we investigate the referents of terms, all we find are more terms; whenever we try to grasp onto some apparently independent *fact*, all we find are yet more facts, more interrelated causes and conditions to explain or justify it. This is one sense of *conceptual proliferation*—that language has no final referent, no ultimate foundation. Its meaning is forever receding beyond the horizon.

Alternatively, to the extent that we can see through these conventions by examining more closely, by understanding more clearly, what it means to see and know and communicate things conventionally, to that extent we can glimpse the dependently arisen phenomena as they are: appearances empty of essence yet full of causes and conditions.

These two ways of understanding worldly conventions—either misleadingly, as implicitly positing essences to all phenomena, or as the empty play of signs our sensorial and mental faculties endlessly traffic in—will soon be enshrined in Yogācāra's *imagined nature* and *dependent nature*, respectively.

97. Gazzaniga 2008, 247ff.

Some implications of the two truths

Nāgārjuna does not hesitate to draw out the implications of this way of thinking. First, since we cannot find the essence of anything, and since essences play no explanatory role in the causal flux of the world we experience, then the various ways we slice the world up into names and concepts and the systems of relations among them all have a slightly arbitrary air.[98] This is also true for Buddhist concepts, as the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras never stop reminding us. Attachment to concepts, even Buddhist ones, becomes an obstacle to seeing the world as it is.

Second, this dooms from the start any attempt to definitively describe "reality" in any ultimate sense. All such attempts, and the concepts involved, would be empty (*śūnya*) of inherent meaning. Thus, everything is empty in the sense that, upon analysis, neither intrinsic existence nor inherent meaning remain cogent or coherent. In this limited sense, emptiness is the ultimate truth—not ontologically but referentially. Any verbal doctrine, any attribute, *including emptiness itself*, is just another conventional expression. Therefore, Nāgārjuna cautions:

> "Empty" should not be asserted.
> "Nonempty" should not be asserted.
> Neither both nor neither should be asserted.
> They are only used nominally (*prajñapti*). (22.11)

Despite the claim that emptiness is the way things ultimately are, it is not a substantial absolute, a substratum underlying all phenomena, supporting them and giving them reality in the way that God or Brahman are often thought to do. Emptiness refers to the specific *lack* of essence found in any phenomenon because it is dependently arisen. It is not an *independent* reality, since it depends on reference to particular phenomena; emptiness is empty, too. It denotes a simple absence and an absence is not an

98. Which is *not* to say that anything goes. As Garfield (1995, 200n67) rightly points out, our conventional categories "reflect our needs, our biological, psychological, perceptual, and social characteristics, as well as our languages and customs. Given these constraints and conventions, there are indeed facts of the matter regarding empirical claims and regarding the meanings of words. But there is no transcendent standpoint, Nāgārjuna would insist, from which these conventions and constraints can be seen as justified."

independent thing. Those who treat emptiness as if it were a view (*dṛṣṭi*), an ultimate description of reality, are, Nāgārjuna warns, "incurable":

> The victorious ones have said
> that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
> For whomever emptiness is a view,
> that one is considered incurable. (13.8)

It follows, our third point, that the purpose of these doctrines is not to articulate some ultimate description, some new ontology or *view*. They are *remedies* to cure us of our propensity to take our conceptual constructions at face value. Buddhist analyses are meant to help us see through our fabrications, to see them for what they are, and to ultimately realize the futility of holding onto *any* fixed view of reality. They are skillful means devised by the Buddha,

> who, through compassion,
> taught the true doctrine
> that leads to the relinquishing of all views. (27.30)

And with this complete pacification of proliferation (*prapañcopaśama*), one may finally realize that "No Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone" (25.24). For ultimately, these too are illusions, in the sense that they do not exist in the way they appear—an illusory Buddha teaching illusory beings who suffer from the illness of illusion.

> Afflictions, actions, bodies,
> agents, and fruits are
> like a city of *gandharvas* and
> like a mirage or a dream (17.33).

Fourth, if every "thing" is empty, then this is a quality that applies equally to everything. There is an ultimate *sameness* to all phenomena (*dharmasamatā*) that neither negates nor impedes their conventionally designated forms or qualities; their *form* is forever empty of essence yet full of changing conditions. This follows from the equation of emptiness with dependent

arising, of ultimate with conventional truth, and is nowhere more striking than in Nāgārjuna's equation of saṃsāra with nirvāṇa. How could we imagine that either saṃsāra or nirvāṇa had some inherent existence or characteristic differentiating them? For if they did, Nāgārjuna argues, they would be inescapable and unattainable, respectively. Thus, he declares:

> There is not the slightest difference
> between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.
> Whatever is the limit of nirvāṇa,
> that is the limit of saṃsāra. (25.19–20)

Finally, Mahāyānists recognize the limits of expressibility itself. How can reality be truly and comprehensively characterized? Any quality we could verbalize would necessarily be partial, one-sided, and of course, empty. Therefore the best way—the least misleading way—to characterize reality is to say it is *just as it is*, nothing more, nothing less: it is *thus*. Everything can be equally characterized by its *thusness* or *suchness* (*tathatā*, a term coined by adding the abstract suffix *tā* to the adverb *tatha*, "thus"). But we must be cautious here too; this term does not refer to any discrete thing, substance, or reality called "thusness." The idea of thusness points to the *limits* of reference,[99] not by referring to something said to be beyond concepts (which is a way of referring while denying one is referring), but by showing that the concepts we once imagined had essential referents or intrinsic meanings are, like everything else, ultimately conventional and constructed and hence can never fully capture reality.[100]

The term *thusness* therefore points not only to the limits of referentiality regarding the ultimate but also to the ineffability of everyday life. Thusness is not some supramundane realm where only the buddhas live, but the

99. See Garfield and Priest 2003 for some interesting reflections on this.

100. This self-limiting claim—that terms cannot encompass reality—has a venerable tradition in India from the Upaniṣads on. It is also found in Western monotheisms, where some theologians advocate an *apophatic* understanding of God: that whatever one says about God cannot be literally true since, axiomatically, one cannot *de*-fine, or *de*-limit, what is said to be *in*-finite, without limit. The meaning of "infinite" then is arguably pragmatic, pushing us toward spiritual transformation, to look and see beyond the defined or constructed. See Crossan 1998, especially the first chapter, "A Theology of Limits," on limits and parable in early Christianity.

wholeness of reality as it is, right here and now, if only we could see it *as it is*, freed of our conceptual fabrications.

> Not dependent on another, peaceful, and
> not fabricated by mental fabrication,
> without conceptualization (*nirvikalpa*), without distinctions—
> that is the character of reality (*tattva*). (18.9)

Emptiness plays a central role in the early Mahāyāna view of reality and our human condition. Although we suffer from mis-knowledge or ignorance about how things arise, and thereby form attachments to things that can't be grasped, we can overcome this, the tradition affirms, by seeing things as they truly are. Emptiness, therefore, is not merely the philosophical flipside of dependent arising—things dependently arise precisely because they lack essence. Deep, penetrating insight into the selfless nature of all phenomena, into their emptiness, is profoundly liberating. In this sense, emptiness is both the *groundless ground* of all phenomena as well as the means of liberation from confusion and attachment. Emptiness, the lack of inherent essence, identical with the true *natureless nature* of all things, is thus the common ground that makes both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa possible. It is little wonder that the wondrous instruments adorning the trees of Sukhāvatī, Buddha Amitābha's pure land,[101] sing out praises exalting not just the three divine messengers (Bodhi 2005, 29) of impermanence, selflessness, and suffering but also the liberating message of universal emptiness.

Dependent Designation: A Bridge to Yogācāra

So far we have examined how Indian Buddhism developed from the time of the Buddha to just before Yogācāra begins. Because Yogācāra arose out of the historical background of early Buddhism and the more contemporaneous context of Abhidharma and early Mahāyāna, its basic themes and distinctive concepts were formulated in close relation to the perspectives and issues developed by those two traditions.

101. Inagaki 2003, 69.

The ontological focus of the Abhidharmists and its critique by Nāgārjuna and other early Mahāyānists led to the shift we are about to embark on, toward the more cognitively oriented teachings of Yogācāra. Their innovations need to be understood in light of all the forgoing developments—from the yogic teachings of the Upaniṣads to the early discourses of the Buddha, from Abhidharmic analyses in terms of dharmas to Nāgārjuna's refutation of their inherent existence. But the Yogācārins especially absorbed and reformulated the last two. They realized that dharmic analysis provided sophisticated tools with which to more deeply penetrate mind and mental processes, but they also saw that Abhidharma's emphasis on momentariness occluded the larger temporal context within which that analysis was meaningful and coherent—that of purifying one's mindstream of afflictions and karma.

Moreover, while the concept of the emptiness of all dharmas gave the early Mahāyānists the analytic tools to deconstruct the putative essence of dharmas, their own emphasis on ontology—on how phenomena exist—similarly threatened to occlude the larger cognitive context, one oriented toward spiritual transformation. This point is articulated by two of Nāgārjuna's modern commentators. Garfield (1995, 319) comments on *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*:

> It is a mistake to distinguish conventional from ultimate reality—the dependently arisen from emptiness—at an ontological level. . . . The difference—such as it is—between the conventional and the ultimate is a difference in the way phenomena are conceived/perceived.

The significance of statements like "everything is empty," therefore, does not lie in their denotative import—what they seem to point to—for that would be taking emptiness as an ontology, a *view* or assertion about how things ultimately exist. Rather, its significance lies in its relation to the views people ordinarily hold, specifically about selves and essences. The statement "all phenomena are empty," in other words, serves as a *remedy* to the extreme view of eternalism or essentialism. The purpose of Buddha's teachings,

as Nāgārjuna states, is the pacification of *all* views, not the assertion of another, more correct view, such as "all phenomena are empty."

Hence, once all these deconstructive analyses are said and done, and the concept of essence has been shown to lead to unsolvable incoherencies (no small feat, we might add), we must still address the underlying causes for imagining such essences in the first place—that is, "the way phenomena are conceived/perceived." As most Indian Buddhists agree, these are caused by our dependence on conceptual designations that name and isolate transient processes, reinforcing our tendencies toward imputing and reifying them as essences. The Dalai Lama, in his commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses*, identifies the indispensable *cognitive* roles of designation and imputation in this process:

> Dependent designation, then, means that things exist by way of being labeled upon a suitable basis or through worldly convention. In other words, they are *dependent on their designation by the mind conceiving them*, because all phenomena in the final analysis are conceptual labels applied on aggregations of certain bases. *Their identity cannot be separated from the conceptual mind that labels them.*[102]

This, then, is the immediate context for the first Yogācāra sūtra, which purports to make explicit the Buddha's implicit intent in teaching emptiness: the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

102. Gyatso 2009, 102; emphasis added. This bears comparison with the definition of *idealism* that Gold (2015b) offers in relation to Vasubandhu's Yogācāra: "To call a view idealist it is sufficient merely that it hold that everything is *dependent upon* mind." See also note 193 below.

Part II
Yogācāra

5

The *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*: Reframing Emptiness Cognitively

It's all about the questions we ask. The questions have changed. I mean, the questions always change. That's why we keep writing history.
—Nell Irvin Painter

Ever since the Cognitive Revolution, Sapiens has thus been living in a dual reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations. As time went by, the imagined reality became ever more powerful, so that today the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of imagined entities such as gods, nations and corporations.
—Noah Harari[103]

SO MUCH FOLLOWS from early Mahāyāna's liberating insight into the nature of all phenomena as lacking an unchanging, independent nature, an essence—if only we could see it that way.

To some observers, early Buddhists seemed almost to speak as if we were separate agents acting upon separate objects, and that our compulsive behavioral patterns actually keep us trapped in dissatisfactory lives, from which we seek true release in nirvāṇa. The early Mahāyānists, however, saw this as all too dualistic, for it subtly reinforces our sense that we and the "things" in the world are truly separate and independent from each other. This, the Mahāyānists thought, went hand in hand with other kinds

103. Painter cited in Glaude 2020, 77. Harari 2015, 32.

of dualist thinking, such as the early Buddhists' "selfish" desire for personal liberation at the expense of helping others, their search for the ultimate nature or essence of dharmas, and their highly reified dichotomy between "defiled" saṃsāra and "purified" nirvāṇa.

The early Mahāyānists offered instead a more holistic vision of reality, expressing the nonduality of the two truths and of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and of the buddhas' and bodhisattvas' activities that are *in* but not *of* the world. All these express the buddhas' and bodhisattvas' compassionate *return* to the world to carry out their liberating activities, including, of course, teaching the Dharma. This much is shared by most Mahāyāna traditions throughout Asia.

The tradition that came to be called Yogācāra emerged into history within a few centuries of the first Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and, building upon their core insights, continued to draw out the deeper implications of their teachings, especially the affirmation of the conventional. These are articulated in the first "Yogācāra" sūtra, the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* (hereafter "the sūtra"),[104] which, like the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, purports to be the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). It is dated by modern scholars on linguistic grounds to the second to third century CE. The sūtra sets forth a more-or-less complete outline of the Yogācāra tradition, one that would be developed and elaborated in the centuries that followed. In this chapter we will discuss the most characteristic Yogācāra doctrines presented in the sūtra: the three natures, the three turnings of the wheel, and, to a lesser degree, the storehouse consciousness and the concept of mere perception—which will be discussed in more detail in the chapters dedicated to them.

Basic Themes

It's crucial to examine the teachings of this sūtra in their historical and doctrinal context. Indian Buddhists at that time were faced with multiple discrepancies between the teachings that had developed over the centuries. In

104. For historical and textual information concerning this sūtra, see the comments by Lamotte (1935, 7–29). In addition, there are three English translations: Keenan 2000, Powers 1995, and the more recent online translation by the Buddhavacana Translation Group (BTG, 2020), https://read.84000.co/translation/toh106.html. We will draw on this last translation, citing chapter and section and modifying its terminology and syntax for consistency.

the early teachings and Abhidharma, which the sūtra labels the *first turning of the wheel of Dharma*, the Buddha *seemed* to talk about real objects impinging upon real faculties, giving rise to real states of consciousness. However, the early Mahāyānists argued, the "things" we see and the dharmas we reduce them to, like the "selves" we cling to, are dependently arisen phenomena and hence *empty* of essential nature. This is the focus of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, which the sūtra calls the *second turning of the wheel of Dharma*.

The early Yogācārins emphasized, however, that the *purpose* of teaching emptiness is not to get a correct view of how the world works. Rather, emptiness serves as a *remedy*, a means of breaking free from attachment to our own constructions. This is implicit in the teachings on emptiness, but—the sūtra argues—it needs to be made *explicit*. Hence, its title: *The Discourse* (*sūtra*) *That Explicates* (*nirmocana*) *the [Buddha's] Implicit Intent* (*saṃdhi*).[105] Having explicated the Buddha's intent, the sūtra then calls itself the *third turning of the wheel*. In this way, the *three turnings* served as a framework within which early Yogācārins could organize the diversity of Buddhist teachings up to their own day, not in terms of history so much as in increasingly subtle levels of interpreting the nature and purpose of Buddhist teachings. The teachings are aimed not at setting forth a correct ontology but at transforming ourselves through understanding. We see this in the structure of the sūtra itself, which we will briefly outline.[106]

It begins by declaring that the Buddha does not perceive the world in terms of the categories (*vikalpa*) that blind us ordinary beings, for his own understanding is nondual and inexpressible. Nevertheless—and this is why there even are sūtras—the Buddha provisionally uses the terms and categories of language to lead others to perfect awakening (1.3). He compares this to a magician who conjures up images at a magic show. Like the illusory essences we imagine exist, the images the Buddha conjures up by names

105. There is a nice play on words between *explicit* and *implicit* and the Sanskrit title of the sūtra. *Explicit* originated in the mid-sixteenth century from the Latin *explicat*, "unfolded," from *ex* "out" + *plicare* "to fold." *Implicit* is from the Latin *implicatus*, "folded in." In the sūtra title, *nirmocana* is derived from *nir* + the root *muc*, "to loosen, free from, liberate," and *saṃdhi* from *sam* + *dhā*, "join, fasten, sew together; intention, design" (SED). The sūtra unfolds or explicates (*nirmocana*) what is folded in or sewn together (*saṃdhi*)—that is, implicit.

106. We follow the enumeration of the Tibetan chapters, which differs from the Chinese version.

and signs do not exist in the way they appear. As shared illusions, however, they *do* occur (1.4)—they arise in dependence on our common cognitive processes. Now, people may argue about the details of this or that conjured image, but since reality ultimately is inexpressible, it is pointless to argue over which conjured images are ultimately true or false. The apparitions are just skillful means devised to free sentient beings from their illusions (1.5).

The next few chapters develop these key points. They argue, like the *Diamond Sūtra* and Nāgārjuna, that even though the ultimate and conventional truths are neither the same nor different, beings still need to practice calming and insight meditation to be liberated from the bonds of oppressive states and the deception of signs and images (*nimitta*) (3.7). Thus, in spite of their apparent differences, the thusness underlying all Buddhist doctrines—the five aggregates, the four truths, and so on—is ultimately the same: they are of one taste (4.11). The conventional distinctions among them, however, can and should be skillfully used to liberate sentient beings.

The sūtra then proceeds to analyze how these collective illusions, these imagined essences, occur. It takes the cognitive analyses expressed in the formula of dependent arising and directs them toward the *non*conscious processes that shape and form our conscious experiences. These "secrets of *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*" (mind, thought, and consciousness) are outlined in chapter 5, the "Questions of Viśālamati." It describes how our conscious experience of the world comes prepackaged, as it were, by the linguistic imprints (*vāsanā*) and emotional dispositions that give structure to unconscious cognitive processes—called the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). This is an explicitly "constructivist" model of cognition, which will later be expanded to include an unconscious mode of self-identification and self-grasping—*afflicted mentation*.

The real secret that advanced bodhisattvas know, however, is only revealed at the end of the chapter: *none* of the names and categories used in these analyses are ultimately real. Being "skilled in ultimate meaning," the bodhisattvas neither dispense with these concepts altogether, nor do they take any of them—*citta*, *ālayavijñāna*, visible forms and visual consciousness, dharmas and mental consciousness, and so on—as ultimately real.

Building upon these analyses, the "Questions of Guṇākara" frames the problem of mis-knowledge or illusion in terms of three modalities or *three*

natures: the imagined nature, the dependent nature, and the real nature.[107] Like images in a magic show, we *imagine* the world is populated with fixed entities and unchanging essences, the conjured names and images in everyday expressions (6.9). But by understanding how these appearances arise in *dependence* on our underlying cognitive processes and linguistic predispositions, we can stop imagining things have unchanging essences or natures and come to see the thusness of all phenomena, their *real nature*. This approach—a critical cognitive constructivism—then becomes the lens through which the Yogācārins reinterpreted their inherited traditions.

Chapter 7, the "Questions of Paramārthasamudgata," explains the *three turnings of the wheel of dharma* from this new perspective. It explains the Buddha's *intent* in offering such a wide range of teachings: from the apparent realism of early and Abhidharma Buddhism to the apparent antirealism of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras. The Buddha used these two earlier *turnings*, the sūtra explains, not to formulate a correct ontology—of existence or nonexistence—but to gradually remedy our propensities toward reifying either selves or dharmas—that is, to shift perspectives from the imagined to the dependent nature.

The sūtra thus seeks a middle way between the two extremes of existence and nonexistence. This may seem puzzling at first, since Nāgārjuna already called emptiness the middle way (MMK 24.18), and clearly warned against taking it as a fixed view. But the sūtra reports that there were indeed errant Buddhist teachers who took emptiness literally, as if it really did mean nonexistence, and so led their followers to conclude that there are no truths whatsoever, and that since words are merely constructed, they cannot convey any meaning at all. This, however, would leave beings stranded without a viable raft to the other shore—or even faith in the possibility of another shore. The sūtra avoids this by clarifying the Buddha's deeper intent, thereby affirming the importance of doctrines as skillful, provisional tools.

Lest we cling to these new doctrines, however, and imagine that they provide definitive maps of reality, the Buddha quickly warns that each of these three *natures* is actually "without a nature" (*niḥsvabhāva*)—they only serve

107. See BTG, chap. 6, n125, for a useful discussion of the ambiguous term *pariniṣpanna* as referring to both the unconstructed reality that is *tathatā* and the perfected realization of that reality by bodhisattvas. I will use "real nature" rather than the BTG's "actual nature."

pragmatic purposes. We see this back-and-forth pattern in many Mahāyāna sūtras: a problem is identified and an antidote is offered. Once the antidote has cured the disease, we stop taking it. We don't make a diet out of medicine.

All this provides the context for the following chapter on meditation, the "Questions of Maitreya." In the transformation from delusion to insight we learn to see that ordinary perceptions are not faithful renditions of what "actually" exists but variants of the magic show, complex constructs that are *pre-structured* by our underlying cognitive processes. This conceptual insight, however, must be followed by a more radical transformation in which we thoroughly see through the products of our own constructive processes. This is outlined in the practices of calming and insight meditation, which lead to the realization that what appear to be independently existing objects are just cognitive constructs, mere perceptions (*vijñaptimātra*)—after which the remedial concept of *vijñaptimātra* is itself abandoned further on down the road (8.29.8). This realization frees us from our habitual reaction patterns and paves the way to seeing the emptiness of all phenomena, particularly the interdependence of subject and object. The nondual wisdom (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*) that results from this realization is a *fundamental transformation* (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*), tantamount to liberation in classical Yogācāra (10.10).

Note that the sūtra sets these core Yogācāra doctrines—describing how illusions arise based on our constructive cognitive processes, and the realization that such constructs are mere perceptions—in the context of the magic show, where bodhisattvas skillfully but provisionally develop a variety of teachings whose ultimate "intent," explicated by the three turnings, is not ontological but soteriological: to liberate beings from the bonds of illusion. Let's now examine this in detail.

The Magic Show: Why Bodhisattvas Need Conventional Language

> Form is like a mass of foam
> and feeling—but an airy bubble.
> Perception is like a mirage
> and formations a plantain tree.
> Consciousness is a magic show,
> a juggler's trick entire. (Ñāṇananda 2007, 5)

Both historically and doctrinally, the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* takes up where the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras leave off. Where the early Mahāyānists had identified our basic problem as that of imputing essences where they cannot be found, the early Yogācārins sought to identify the *source* of these imputations in our underlying cognitive schemas and dispositions. Once their naïve realism is deconstructed by these logical, psychological, and meditative analyses, bodhisattvas return to *affirm conventional* truths motivated by the desire to alleviate suffering and liberate all beings.

The sūtra is addressing an apparent paradox. At first blush it might seem that since the signs, names, and concepts informing our ordinary experience all but blind us to the interdependent world all around us, we ought to abandon any attempt to teach through language. After all, the sūtra asks: if all "conventional expressions [arise] from imagination (*vikalpa*)" (1.2) and therefore do not refer to anything that is ultimately real, how can words mean anything at all? On the other hand, bodhisattvas have vowed to liberate innumerable beings from their endless illusions, and this requires them to communicate using the signs, words, and concepts that those beings understand. Therefore, even though Buddhist saints understand that conventional language appears to denote substantial entities, nevertheless they *provisionally* use language in order to lead others to awakening.

The sūtra illustrates this by describing a magic show, such as is still performed on the streets and crossroads of India.[108] Buddhist saints are likened to magicians who can conjure up herds of horses and elephants from nothing but sticks and stones on the side of the road, and then use such tricks for pedagogic purposes. Different people understand these shows quite differently:

> At that time, in the presence of these illusions, those who are naïve, slow-witted, or confused, not perceiving the grass, leaves, twigs, pebbles, or stones, see and hear those magical tricks and think that whatever appears exists. . . . Clinging to these magical illusions according to the way they see and hear things and strongly believing in them, they express themselves through conventions such as "This one is true but the other is false." (1.4)

108. Siegel 1991. See also Huebner et al. 2022.

On the other hand,

> Those who are not naïve or confused but have wisdom perceive the grass, leaves, twigs, pebbles, or stones. They see and hear those magical tricks and understand that whatever appears does not exist. . . . Yet, they understand that the conception (*saṃjñā*) of an elephant regiment exists since its manifestation *as* a conception through skillful means exists. . . . So they understand that all those magical illusions, these magical illusions deceiving the eye, exist [in the way magical illusions do]. Thinking in this way, [these wise beings] do not express themselves through conventions such as "This one is true but the other is false." (1.4)

That is, most of us naïvely take our objects of perception at face value. Those who are *wise*, though, also perceive the illusory elephants and so forth—since the illusions after all *do occur*—but they recognize them for what they are: deceptive images. So they do not argue about which appearance is true and which is false but "express themselves through conventions in order to convey the true nature" of these illusions to others (1.4).

This is, of course, an analogy for ordinary experience. When we see and hear and think about the things in the world, we imagine they exist much as they appear and then argue about which of their characteristics are true or false. This is like arguing about what color an imaginary elephant's hat *really* is. But when those who "have attained the transcendent sublime wisdom . . . [and] have understood that the nature of all phenomena is inexpressible" see and hear such things, they know they do not exist *as they appear*. They know that they "exist in the way magical illusions do," and so do not argue about what they really are. "However, they do express themselves through conventions . . . in order to lead [others] to the perfect realization of this very inexpressible nature of phenomena" (1.5). Bodhisattvas intentionally use illusory language—provisional designations—in order to dismantle widely shared illusions.

The Three Natures

This is the gist of the *three natures*. They depict how we can understand phenomena either as imagined essences, as the naïve onlookers at the

magic show experience them, or as dependent processes lacking essence, as the great magicians, the buddhas and bodhisattvas, see them. And since the basic problem is couched in cognitive rather than ontological terms, the solution is a thoroughgoing cognitive transformation.

What are these different modes of understanding reality?

In the "Guṇākara" chapter the sūtra defines these three natures as follows:

> What is the imagined nature?
>
> It is what is nominally and conventionally posited as the essence or the distinctive characteristic of phenomena, simply in order to designate [them].
>
> What is the dependent nature?
>
> It is the dependent arising of phenomena. It is like this: "When this is, that arises; because this arises, that arises." It is also from "[in dependence on ignorance as a condition], conditioning mental factors [arise]," up to "thus the whole great mass of suffering comes to be."
>
> What is the real nature?
>
> It is their true reality—namely, the unsurpassable complete and perfect awakening that is finally attained by bodhisattvas when they realize this [true reality] through their diligence and correct application of mind and then become perfectly familiar with this realization. (6.6)

To illustrate these abstract concepts, the sūtra uses the traditional Indian trope of someone whose visual field is filled with erratic appearances in an eye disease called *timira*:

> You should consider the *imagined* nature to be just like the falsity of the visual aberrations [perceived] by someone suffering from the *timira* disease.
>
> You should consider the *dependent* nature to be just like the phenomenal appearances manifesting to this very person suffering from the *timira* disease, such as hairs, flies, sesame seeds, [or patches of] blue, yellow, red, or white.

> You should consider the *real* nature to be just like the original and unerring visual object seen by the same person when their vision is healthy and free from visual aberrations resulting from the *timira* disease. (6.7)

In standard Buddhist analyses, conscious experiences arise in dependence on the interaction between stimuli and our cognitive faculties. But, Yogācārins point out, we are so thoroughly beguiled by our linguistic and conceptual categories (*vikalpa*) that we *imagine* that these stimuli are independent objects with their own essential characteristics. This superimposition of essential natures onto the interdependent world is the basic sense of the *imagined nature*.[109]

This differs from the perspective of the *dependent nature*—which is word for word dependent arising.[110] It takes interaction as primary and seemingly separate entities as secondary. It looks at the components of cognition—something impinges on a faculty, giving rise to awareness—not as independent entities but as interdependent processes. Imagining they are independent entities is the false imagination (*parikalpita*) that leads to all the problems and incoherencies Nāgārjuna pointed out.

This is, though, more than a critique of essences as an ontological category. It also applies, as in early Mahāyāna, to the characteristics imputed to dharmas—not just to what *exists* (*svabhāva*) but to what they *are* (*svalakṣaṇa*), what sets one thing off from everything else. Names and conventional terms reinforce the sense that "things" have essences, and this affects the way we perceive them. Once we know something's name and function, we automatically focus on its seemingly essential characteristics instead of its numerous other qualities. A *ball* is something to play with, a *table* to put things on, while it is the *tree* that *produces* the fruit, as if magically indepen-

109. Yogācāra texts use two more-or-less interchangeable Sanskrit terms for this: *parikalpita svabhāva* and *parikalpita lakṣaṇa*. *Parikalpita* is based on the same root as *concept* (*vikalpa*; from *klp*: to order, arrange, invent), as discussed at length in the preceding chapter.

110. Sponberg (1983, 100) argues that the dependent nature serves as the *ontological* basis for the *epistemological* distinction between the imagined or imputational nature and the fully perfected or real nature. This, however, is strongly disputed by Brennan 2018. The definitions and functions of the three natures varied considerably from one text to the next over many centuries.

dent of sunshine, soil, and seed. We even search for the essential characteristics of such obvious aggregates as *selves*, *nations*, *genders*, and *races* and then argue endlessly over which of these characteristics are true and which are false.[111]

Once the practitioner has even momentarily brought these processes to a halt, once they stop imagining essential characteristics where none can be found, they begin to see instead the incessant arising and falling of phenomena, eventually coming to see reality just as it is, in all its wondrous thusness. In short, they realize its *real nature*.

The three natures as no-natures

Each of these three natures actually refers to different ways that phenomena are empty and lack an essential nature—that is, the three "natures" refer to three kinds of *no-nature* (*niḥsvabhāva*). The way falsely imagined phenomena have no nature is compared to the fictitious "sky flower," said to grow in midair—a common Indian trope for something that does not exist (7.7). Through further practice we realize that the appearance of intrinsic essences and attributes only arises in dependence on our constructive cognitive processes. Hence, the "lack of essence of the dependent nature"—its no-nature—is compared to a *magical apparition*, which occurs but is not what it appears to be. When we realize this, we finally see things for what they are, in all their illustrious thusness. The "lack of essence of the real nature," its emptiness, is thus compared to *space*. It "consists in the selflessness of phenomena and pervades everything . . . exactly like space, which consists in the essencelessness of form and pervades everything" (7.7).

imagined nature	names, concepts	visual defects	sky flowers
dependent nature	dependent arising	deceptive appearances	magical apparition
thoroughly real nature	thusness	unerring objects	space

111. Bloom 2005, 50–51: "There is an important sense, then, in which races are artifacts—that is, the concept of race has been created by people, not by nature. . . . The same trend toward bad essentialism shows itself when adults assume that there is an objective fact of the matter as to whether or not someone is really Jewish, black, Chinese, Arab, and so on."

These three no-natures, the sūtra explains, is what the Buddha intended (*saṃdhi*) when he taught the concept of emptiness: not as an analysis of how things exist in order to establish the right view but as an analysis of how illusions arise and cease in order to bring about a spiritual transformation. This approach—that the reasons the Buddha taught emptiness needs to be made *explicit*—provides the interpretative framework for understanding his diverse teachings up until the third century CE. This is the famous trope of the three turnings of the wheel.

The Three Turnings of The Wheel: What Was the Buddha Thinking?

> A dharma is not a dharma, therefore it is a dharma.
> —the *Diamond Sūtra*

In the development of Indian Buddhism since the Buddha's lifetime, both Abhidharma and the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras presented themselves as incorporating and superseding what preceded them, articulated in their differing versions of the two truths. Similarly, the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* interprets these two earlier stages of Buddhist teachings through its trope of the three turnings of the wheel. It lumps early Buddhism and Abhidharma together as a kind of realism. In response, the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and Nāgārjuna critically rejected that realism by declaring that all phenomena are empty. But despite Nāgārjuna's warnings (MMK 13.8), this approach always entailed the possibility of becoming yet another view (*dṛṣṭi*) in its own right—as if emptiness were the end rather than a means to the end. To prevent this, the early Yogācārins sought to clarify the broader rationale, the *implicit intent*, of the idea of emptiness—as an indispensable tool for liberation but still just a raft to be abandoned on the other shore.

To explain why the Buddha offered such divergent teachings and how to make sense of their apparent discrepancies, the sūtra introduces the schema of the three turnings. In chapter 7, "Absence of Essence," a bodhisattva named Paramārthasamudgata ("arisen from ultimate truth") describes the first turning:

> The Blessed One also spoke in many ways of the defining characteristics specific to the five aggregates, mentioning the defining

> characteristic of their arising, disintegration, abandonment, and comprehension. (7.1)

Paramārthasamudgata notes that the Buddha also spoke of the salient characteristics of all the elements of early and Abhidharma Buddhism—of the sense spheres and dependent arising, of the twelve sense domains, of mindfulness, of the limbs of the path, and so on—as if they all actually possessed their own-characteristics or essences.

On the other hand, the sūtra continues, the Buddha also taught the ultimate aspect of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras: "All phenomena are without an essence, unborn, unceasing, primordially in the state of peace, and naturally in the state of nirvāṇa" (7.1). The sūtra explains a bit later how this logically follows from the idea of emptiness, in what might be called the *basic Mahāyāna syllogism*:

> What lacks a specific defining characteristic is unborn.
> What is unborn is unceasing.
> What is unborn and unceasing is primordially in the state of peace.
> What is primordially in the state of peace is naturally in the state of nirvāṇa.
> For what is naturally in the state of nirvāṇa, there is nothing in the slightest that passes into the state of nirvāṇa. (7.8)

Puzzled, Paramārthasamudgata notes that the Buddha taught two apparently opposite things: that there both are and are not essences or characteristics, and there both are and are not bondage to saṃsāra and liberation from it—that is, nirvāṇa. This set him to wondering:

> What was the Blessed One thinking when he said, "All phenomena are without an essence, unborn, unceasing, primordially in the state of peace, and naturally in the state of nirvāṇa?" (7.1)

In short, what was the Buddha's *intent* in teaching that all phenomena, even the nuts and bolts of his own earlier doctrines, are empty and without essence?

The Buddha responds by *telling* us that his intent was to teach three aspects of emptiness:

> Paramārthasamudgata, the lack of essence has three aspects. Having in mind the lack of essence regarding defining characteristics, the lack of essence regarding arising, and the lack of essence regarding the ultimate, I thus taught what is called the lack of essence of all phenomena. (7.3)

That is, when he taught the idea of emptiness, the lack of essence of all phenomena, he was not only thinking about dependent arising and the lack of an *ontological* essence, which earlier Mahāyānists had emphasized. He was also thinking of a larger context, of three distinct ways of understanding the purpose and content of emptiness—to wit, the three *natureless* natures. The sūtra then states, and I paraphrase:

1. He was thinking *remedially* (imagined nature).
   To counter our tendencies to impute essences through language, he taught "the lack of essence with regard to the defining characteristics," which are only "nominally and conventionally posited." (7.4)
2. He was thinking *causally* (dependent nature).
   There is no essence in terms of a dependently arising phenomenon because it "arises on account of other causes and not by itself." (7.5)
3. Most importantly, he was thinking *soteriologically* (real nature).
   He taught "the lack of essence in all phenomena," the ultimate lack of essence—akin to the natural and quiescent state of nirvāṇa—because it is "an object conducive to purification." (7.6)

All this—three aspects of emptiness for three distinct, but interrelated aims—is what the Buddha was thinking when he taught emptiness, the lack of essence, in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras. Even emptiness has no singular, unitary characteristic.

Why the first two turnings need to be interpreted

With this as a rubric, the sūtra explains the Buddha's reasons for teaching such diverse doctrines. The first turning of the wheel of Dharma, early Buddhism and Abhidharma, taught that things in the world—the faculties, cognitive objects, and other dharmas—have a substantial and *real*

existence, each with its own distinctive essence or characteristic. But, the sūtra warns:

> In the deer park of Ṛṣivadana in Vārāṇasī, the Blessed One first set in motion the wonderful wheel of Dharma by teaching the four noble truths to those who were engaged in the disciple's vehicle.[112] Not a single god or human in the world had previously ever turned such a wheel of Dharma. However, this turning of the Dharma wheel by the Blessed One was surpassable and adapted to the circumstances. Being of provisional meaning (*neyārtha*), it became a topic of dispute. (7.30)

These initial teachings were not definitive, the sūtra says, because the idea that dharmas have their own essential characteristics were "adapted to the circumstances."

For a deeper understanding, the Buddha taught the second turning of the wheel, the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras. These sūtras criticized the apparent realism of Abhidharma and taught that all dharmas are instead empty and without essence. Thus, the sūtra states:

> Then, for those who were engaged in the Great Vehicle, [the Buddha] turned the second, even more wonderful, wheel of Dharma in the form of a teaching on emptiness: "All phenomena are without an essence, unborn, unceasing, primordially in the state of peace, and naturally in the state of nirvāṇa." However, this turning of the Dharma wheel by the Blessed One was surpassable and adapted to the circumstances. Being of provisional meaning, it became a topic of dispute. (7.30)

Like the first, the teachings of this second turning are not definitive; they too need interpretation: First, to clarify that the *intent* of teaching

112. "Disciple" (*śrāvaka*) is a term Mahāyānists coined to contrast the disciples who are aiming only for their own liberation with buddhas and bodhisattvas, who are dedicated to the liberation of all beings. The sūtra uses a similar term, *pratyekabuddha*, a "solitary realizer," for one who aims for awakening for themselves, without teaching others.

emptiness is not to express the correct view—that things in the world are impermanent, interdependent, and lack essence—but to facilitate liberation. Second, to prevent those empowered by the deconstructive logic of emptiness from falling into the extreme of nihilism, as teachers of Buddhism repeatedly witness in the classroom: whenever we have to remind students that the purpose of emptiness is to free beings from their tendencies to impute essences and not to deny reality *in toto*, then we too are clarifying the *intent* of the second turning.

In this vein, the sūtra describes errant Buddhist teachers who thought that the negation of essence also entailed the negation of existence altogether, and that passages such as those in Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras that negate essentialized doctrines ("there is no Dharma") are also negating the entire Buddhist framework of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Even though the *Diamond Sūtra* clearly warns its readers not to "get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do *not* exist" (Nhat Hanh 1992, 6), nevertheless, the Buddha notes, there were those who, lacking sufficient merit and wisdom, did indeed take such negations literally:

> Once they have heard my teaching, they do not understand my profound explanations in accordance with my *underlying intent* exactly as it is. . . . They wrongly conceive it according to its literal meaning: "All phenomena are *only* without an essence, *only* unborn, *only* unceasing, *only* primordially in the state of peace, and *only* naturally in the state of nirvāṇa." As a consequence of this, they acquire the view that all phenomena are nonexistent and the view that they are without defining characteristics. (7.20)

Based on this misunderstanding, they "negate all phenomena by [negating] all characteristics," negating not just the imagined nature but the *dependent* and *real* natures as well. That is, they imagine that negating essentialized concepts, such as "names and conventional designations," also entails negating causal processes such as karma and the very possibility of liberation (the dependent and real nature, respectively). They succumb, in short, to the extreme view of nonexistence (7.20)—illustrating Nāgārjuna's warning that misunderstanding emptiness is like grabbing a snake by its tail

(MMK 24.11). By taking emptiness literally and interpreting it nihilistically, they end up denying both karma and nirvāṇa.

How does this nihilistic interpretation arise? It easily occurs when people misunderstand the implications of the ultimate and conventional truths. The fact that we cannot identify a truly existing cause wholly independent of its effect does not mean that there is no causality whatsoever. It just means that cause and effect are mutually defined and necessarily rely on conventional methods of data collection, on theoretical models to interpret that data, and empirical means to implement it. Thus, despite the rigorous deconstruction of dharmas as truly existing entities, Mahāyānists argue, conventional causality still operates and liberation is still possible; moreover, they insist, any teaching to that effect will necessarily be expressed in conventional, not ultimate, terms.

What the framework of the three natures is doing is more carefully circumscribing the *object of negation*: what needs to be negated are the imputed essences enabled by names, concepts, and doctrines, even Buddhist ones—*that* is the problem, not the entire framework of karma and nirvāṇa.[113] The three natures help us distinguish the conventional *falsehood* of imputed essences from the *truth* of dependent arising.

This point has profound practical consequences. If we not only negate the existence of what we (1) falsely *imagine* but also ignore how these false appearances (2) arise in *dependence* on other conditions and the possibility of (3) thoroughly seeing through such appearances, then we also negate the necessity of analyzing the cognitive processes whereby such illusions arise and the possibility of liberating ourselves from them altogether. As the sūtra warns, if we take the negations in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras literally and end up negating these other two as well, then we lose sight of the larger purpose and *context* of their powerful deconstructive analyses. The deconstruction of essentialism is a crucial *stage* on the path to deeper insight, to be sure, but we cannot stop there. We need to continue drawing out its deeper implications—"therefore it is a dharma."

To avoid these nihilistic consequences, the sūtra states that the three

113. Heartfelt thanks to Jonathan Gold for clarifying these and many other obscure points in the sūtra in his insightful paper "Without Karma and Nirvāṇa, Buddhism Is Nihilism: The Yogācāra Contribution to the Doctrine of Emptiness" (Gold 2015c).

applications of emptiness—the three *no-natures*—should be taught in a *particular sequence*. A practitioner who is not well grounded in practice should first be taught the emptiness associated with dependent arising, which both affirms the efficacy of karma and facilitates a deep "aversion and repulsion" toward conditioned phenomena, based on a recognition of the futility of seeking permanent pleasure in impermanent things (7.11). Practicing this, they will eventually come to understand the lack of essence of things as they are, an understanding that is no longer infused with even the predispositions of conventional designations.[114] Once they have thereby attained sufficient "merit and insight," they may then be taught the emptinesses of defining characteristics and of the ultimate (the imagined and real nature, respectively). That is, they come to understand *without misinterpretation* that even Buddhist doctrines have no ultimate characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*, *nimitta*) and that, since all phenomena are empty, there are no independently existing beings that are either bound or liberated—all such "beings" are already of the nature of nirvāṇa if only we could realize it. But the sūtra warns against taking this latter, advanced *nondual* view as a starting point, since that tends to undermine the strenuous efforts necessary to personally and directly realize it. It invites, in other words, what we call spiritual bypassing.

In short, the sūtra sets out the *practical* rationale for teaching the first turning of the wheel before the second. Without a sure grounding in causality—that is, karma and dependent arising—the powerful deconstructive analyses of emptiness can, like a snake wrongly grasped, lead to the death knell of nihilism.

This is not merely an academic question; it is arguably at the core of the crisis of modernity. Traditional religious worldviews have been continuously challenged by the findings of historical scholarship and modern science, just as traditional essentialist theologies and philosophies are currently challenged by the philosophies of deconstruction and postmodernism. If we cannot take the contents of a religious worldview literally—if their cosmologies and essentialist philosophies do not withstand the scrutiny of historical, scientific, or philosophical analysis—does this mean that their *entire* worldview is simply false and meaningless? And if their doctrines are

114. *Tha snyad bag la nyal*; **vyavahāra-anuśaya*. BTG 7.13.

shown to be contingent and changing, does this mean that the meaningful experiences and insights and moral teachings these systems refer to are also simply fallacious? A first pass through such deconstructive analyses, whether scientific, postmodern, or Buddhist, might suggest just this conclusion: if it ain't literally and eternally true, then it's simply false—end of story.

Such all-or-nothing thinking leaves one side of the debate defending increasingly outmoded and implausible cosmologies to support the important moral systems they believe they rely on. And it leaves the other side with an equally extreme and one-sided view: that there is no truth or goodness in our inherited historical traditions unless they can be confirmed and "proven" by the theories and methods of modern science—a worldview that, for now at least, denigrates such "superstitions" as an afterlife, karma, or liberation, if not also the possibility of making any moral claims or judgments whatsoever. This is one reason many well-meaning religious people—who think and feel that reality, truth, and goodness can only be described and defended in terms of unchanging *eternal* truths or essences—end up denying or denigrating the science, philosophy, and historical scholarship that challenges their eternalist or essentialist doctrines. In short, while some people fixate on the essentialism of "there is a dharma," others succumb to the pure negation of "there is no dharma."

The sūtra suggest a middle ground between these two extremes. It rejects the false dichotomy of literalist either/or thinking and emphasizes instead the liberative *intent* of emptiness. It thereby affirms the *conventional* truths of multiple teachings without getting caught up in the endless controversies, based on an untenable literalness, that have characterized so many intractable disputes over so many centuries (what color the illusory elephant's hat *really* is). In other words, by jettisoning a misguided literal interpretation of emptiness as nonexistence in favor of a pragmatic one based on its liberative intent, the *Discourse That Explicates the Buddha's Implicit Intent* has articulated a middle way to keep the Mahāyāna raft afloat. How so?

Why the third turning does not need interpretation

The third turning, as presented in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* itself, is a bit puzzling. It shares the *exact same* content as the second turning, but the sūtra deems only this third turning to be definitive. After his brief

summaries of the first two turnings, whose teachings he said were "surpassable and adapted to the circumstances," Paramārthasamudgata states:

> Then, for those who were engaged in all vehicles, you turned the third wonderful Dharma wheel of excellent discernment in reference to the statement "All phenomena are without an essence, unborn, unceasing, primordially in the state of peace, and naturally in the state of nirvāṇa." This turning of the Dharma wheel by the Blessed One was unsurpassable and not limited to the circumstances. (7.30)

Why is this third turning definitive, while the second one is not? And why doesn't it lead to controversy, while the second turning does?[115]

The sūtra provides its first clue in terms of different audiences: the second turning is "for those who are engaged in the Great Vehicle," or Mahāyāna, while the third is "for those who are engaged in all vehicles." In this way, the sūtra returns to the crucial point that the purpose of Buddhist doctrine is not to establish the correct view but to lead sentient beings toward liberation. And this shift entails a different set of criteria altogether, one based on the simple observation that "some are slow to understand, some are not so slow, and some are quick to understand."[116] From this perspective, there is no universal panacea or definitive doctrine, but only *more or less* skillful teachings. To illustrate this, the sūtra presents a picture of various groups of antagonists endlessly arguing over seemingly incompatible tenets, in contrast to its own followers who are peacefully practicing distinct, yet equally effective, rafts to the other shore. *Skillful means* entails using different approaches to meet the needs of different students. The criterion is not whether a technique is "true" but how well it helps them achieve liberation.

Nevertheless, we often fixate on the apparent differences in the doctrines informing these skillful means and argue that "this one is true but the other

115. It is worth noting that the radical proposition in this short statement—that all phenomena are "naturally in the state of nirvāṇa"—has led to the most widespread and enduring controversies in all of Mahāyāna Buddhism: those surrounding the notion of buddha nature.

116. Keenan 2000, 40; BTG 7.14.

is false" (1.4). Why does this happen, and how does the sūtra recommend avoiding it?

Since any description is necessarily partial and one-sided, "reality" is ultimately inexpressible. So, too, is the realization of the Buddha and his followers—"the noble ones [who] are thus completely and perfectly awakened to inexpressible [reality] through their sublime gnosis and vision" (1.5). This realization, by itself, does not occasion controversy. That occurs when people try to ultimately describe reality in terms of specific concepts and doctrines, in terms of what the sūtra calls "speculative views." It describes this descent into disputation:

> I have explained that the ultimate is what is cognized by noble beings in a personal and intuitive way, whereas ordinary beings' knowledge [resulting from interacting] with one another belongs to the domain of speculation. Therefore, Dharmodgata, you should know in this way through this approach that the ultimate is characterized as transcending all speculation . . .
>
> The ultimate represents the domain in which there is no phenomenal appearance, whereas speculation is the domain of phenomenal appearance. . . .
>
> The ultimate is inexpressible, whereas speculation is the domain of verbalization. . . .
>
> The ultimate is free from all conventions, whereas speculation is the domain of conventions. . . .
>
> The ultimate is devoid of argumentative disputation, whereas speculation is the domain of argumentative disputation. (2.2)

In short, whatever is known and expressed through appearances and verbalization is *necessarily* conventional and hence susceptible to speculation, disputation, and argumentation, whereas the ineffable realization of reality remains inexpressible and above the fray.

At bottom, then, and despite the superficial differences between the three turnings, they all possess the same "taste"—that is, the definitive yet inexpressible taste of emptiness. Like space, emptiness pervades all the teachings without obstructing their multiple conventional expressions:

> Space is identical everywhere and does not hinder any endeavor. Likewise, this teaching of definitive meaning expounded by the Blessed One in reference to the statement, "All phenomena are without an essence, unborn, unceasing, primordially in the state of peace, and naturally in the state of nirvāṇa," *is identical in all discourses* of provisional meaning and does not hinder any endeavor in the course of the disciples', solitary realizers', or bodhisattvas' vehicle. (7.28, emphasis added)

We could think of this as the sūtra taking one of the implications of emptiness—that being empty of essence does not obstruct the efficacy of conventional causality—and extrapolating it to language and doctrine: being empty of ultimate or definitive meaning does not obstruct the efficacy of conventional teachings. Therefore, the sūtra continues, different teachings are effective for their appropriate audiences, each according to their own abilities and predispositions. Even though there are various kinds of practitioners, the Buddha declares, in truth only a *single vehicle* is taught.

> This is why it is the single path of purification for disciples, solitary realizers, and bodhisattvas. Since there is only a single purification, there is no other. Therefore, with this in mind, I taught the Single Vehicle. (7.14)

In other words, if reality is ultimately inexpressible and *none* of our descriptions of it are truly definitive—if all concepts, doctrines, theories, and models are figurative and practical "rafts to the other shore," as philosophers such as Nāgārjuna, Wittgenstein, and Kuhn have argued—then there is little point in arguing about which doctrine is ultimately correct. The differences between various models and methodologies concern their efficacy: which teachings are more skillful for which problems and which people at which time and place?

In this respect, Yogācārins found it to be skillful to reformulate the earlier Buddhist analyses of our propensities toward reifying essences into the expanded, Yogācāra terms of the dependent nature.

Introducing *Ālayavijñāna*: Unconscious Construction of Our Collective Worlds

This is where the idea of *ālayavijñāna* comes into play. If the efficacy of doctrines is determined by how well they treat what specifically ails us—the particular illusions we labor under, reinforced by the particular languages, concepts, and cultures we inhabit—then liberation is achieved by whatever helps us to see through all these constructions. The Yogācārins therefore repurposed much of the Abhidharma framework for analyzing these cognitive processes, albeit with the recognition that most of our constructive cognitive processes operate below the threshold of conscious awareness. And they reformulated these analyses within their own Mahāyāna framework: first, the emptiness of all dharmas, and second in terms of the three natures, which shows how we can see through our imaginary constructs by understanding how they dependently arise through our cognitive processes, eventually coming to see reality as it is.

Of course, seeing through our mental constructions is easier said than done, and for very good reasons: we have evolved to see and think in terms of essences and entities.[117] In the perspective of both Buddhism and modern biology, our underlying dispositions are seen as having been gradually constructed over long expanses of time through cumulative feedback processes in which the results of previous actions and experiences serve as the basis and support for succeeding ones. Biology sees this as occurring through the processes of natural selection, while for the Buddhists it occurs through dependent arising.[118] Both see us human beings as deeply predisposed to see and feel and think in terms of essences and entities, which in turn strongly influences the way we experience our worlds.

In early Buddhism, as we recall, the world (*loka*) as we experience it is a complex construct that arises out of the interaction between our sensory and cognitive faculties and whatever impinges upon them. Most cognitive scientists similarly argue that our experiences are thoroughly constructed: everything we experience—all objects, thoughts, feelings, activities—depend upon countless complex cognitive processes in order for them to

117. Hoffman 2019; Bloom 2005; Gazzaniga 2008.

118. Waldron 2000 and Jackson 2020.

occur in the first place.[119] These processes construct a nearly invisible bubble, an "ego tunnel" in Metzinger's fitting phrase (2009), in which we are typically not only unable to sense or know what is beyond our capacity to sense or know, but we seldom even realize that we are in such a tunnel. Short of awakening, the world for us is inescapably a constructed world.

Since most of these constructive processes occur automatically, outside of our immediate awareness, this poses a fundamental problem. What we consciously experience—the "objective" world as well our "subjective" identities—are the *results* of processes we cannot directly discern.[120] Nor are these objective and subjective worlds a function of individuals alone; rather, they are formed and informed through the mediating influences of society, culture, and above all, language—that most distinctive form of human social cognition and communication.[121] These worlds are our unconscious, collective constructions of reality—hardly reality *in and of itself*.

But, the Buddhists argue, we can work to weaken these propensities toward illusion, toward imputing the essential entities of the imagined nature, if we more fully understand how they came about—that is, if we understand how they dependently arise, their dependent nature. And to do this, we need to more thoroughly analyze how our cognitive processes function. Thus Yogācārins returned to the arena of Abhidharmic analysis, but in a distinctively Mahāyāna mode.

These themes are taken up in the fifth chapter of the sūtra, the "Questions of Viśālamati," which outlines the innovative Yogācāra cognitive model: the concept of *ālayavijñāna*, or the *storehouse consciousness*. We will look at this brief outline here, examining its more detailed developments in our next chapter.

As we have seen, the early Mahāyānists critiqued parts of the Abhidharma traditions, especially the concept of essence. The Yogācārins addressed the questions that followed from this: if the notion of essence is so obviously flawed, then why do we so naturally perceive and conceive of things in terms of essences? Why is it so hard to even recognize, let alone rectify,

119. Hoffman 2000.

120. Damasio 2000. See chap. 5, "Organism and the Object." Also see Damasio 2010.

121. Tomasello 1999.

our deep dispositions toward imputing essences? And why is the concept of emptiness so darn difficult to understand? This suggests that there is much more to the mind than meets the eye.

These questions also followed from Abhidharma's inherent limitations: as a "theory of consciousness" (Piatigorsky 1984, 202n7), it simply could not account for crucial continuities in our lives. For example, we have all had exalted moments of bliss and insight, in which we imagine we are changed forever. But the heart is unfathomably deep and silently harbors its hidden denizens where the light of awareness rarely shines. However extraordinary our epiphanies may be, most of us return to the everyday world still carrying our familiar baggage and battle scars, which sooner or later resurface to afflict us anew. These are the concrete considerations that classical Buddhists were addressing in their seemingly abstract debates over the continuity of *kleśas* and karma: what happens when you come down from the mountaintop, up from the meditative cushion, or out of the counselor's office? When "stuff comes up," where was it, and what was it doing there?

What the tradition needed to clearly articulate, to use the sūtra's metaphor of mindstream, is how our mind-waves on the surface could be buffeted by every gust of wind, while being simultaneously formed and supported by the ongoing undercurrents at deeper levels of our awareness. In short, they needed to articulate how our habits of the heart persist.

These were the questions in the air when the early Yogācārins arrived on the scene. Yogācāra scholar Lambert Schmithausen argues that the first mention of the concept of *ālayavijñāna* occurred in a voluminous text called the *Yogācārabhūmi*, the *Stages of Yogic Practice* (to which we will return in the next chapter). Although traditionally attributed to Asaṅga, one of the "founders" of classical Yogācāra, the *Stages of Yogic Practice* was more likely compiled over many centuries, since it evinces evolving positions on many subjects, some preceding and others succeeding the formulations found in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

One of its early passages introduces a subtle form of awareness that persists during the attainment of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*), when all overt cognitive processes come to a halt. It is an "*ālaya*" (storehouse) *vijñāna*, the text states, that persists within the material sense faculties and that "grasps onto" the seeds or potentials for cognitive awareness that will arise when one

awakens from that meditation.[122] This conception initiates a process of differentiating two distinct layers or types of cognitive process: *ālayavijñāna* as a subtle and ongoing form of awareness closely connected to our bodily processes, and "where" those seeds persist, in contrast to the traditional six kinds of cognitive awareness, which are now dubbed *manifest awareness* (*pravṛttivijñāna*) since they momentarily "arise, manifest, commence" (*pra* + *vṛt*, cognate with English *vert* as in "invert, convert," etc.) when something impinges on the faculties.

The term *ālaya* is also telling. Its verbal root *lī* means "dwelling, receptacle, home" as well as "to cling, stick, or adhere to" and "to lie, recline, hide, or vanish" (SED, 154; PED, 109). The term is widely used in modern Indic languages: the Himālayas are the "abode of snow;" a *viśvavidyālaya* is a university, the "home of universal knowledge"; while *bhojanālaya* is that "abode of shared enjoyment" we all know and love: a dining hall. There is also an affective nuance to the term: "attachment, desire, clinging" (PED, 109). In short, this newly differentiated form of subtle awareness, *ālaya-vijñāna*, clings to the body and functions as a kind of basal awareness that persists when all other cognitive processes come to a halt. There it plays home to the karmic potentialities denoted by the metaphor of seeds, providing the groundwork for more overtly conscious processes to arise.

These newly differentiated types of *vijñāna* reflect the two aspects of *vijñāna* we saw in the early Pāli texts: cognitive awareness that arises when something impinges on our sense faculties, and consciousness as the third limb in the formula of dependent arising, which arises conditioned by *saṃskāra*, the karmic formations, structures, and complexes built up through past experience:

> Visual awareness arises dependent on eye and visible form.
> (SN 12.44)
> Consciousness arises dependent upon karmic formations.
> (SN 12.2)

This latter sense of *vijñāna* is closely related in the early texts to the persistence of the stream of *citta* over multiple lifetimes—what Wijesekera

122. Schmithausen 1987, 12 and 18n146.

called *saṃsāric vijñāna*. *Vijñāna* was the only factor explicitly said to persist into the next life, closely associated with what most characterizes individuals: our potential for experience generated by past actions, our collection of habitual dispositions, and the cognitive and affective structures and complexes that have been built up through experience—that is, our karmic potentials, latent afflictions, and karmic complexes. Since the continuity of these karmic potentials and afflictive dispositions were major conundrums in the context of momentariness, as we have seen, we might think of this new Yogācāra model as uniting these two dimensions of *vijñāna* within the strictures of momentariness. It brings together, on the one hand, the underlying, persisting *ālayavijñāna* closely associated with bodily processes and "storing the seeds" from past actions, with, on the other hand, the momentary flashes of conscious awareness of discrete objects.

How conscious and nonconscious processes construct appearances

All this entailed a systemic reworking of the Indian Buddhist model of mind, one that portrays a dynamic and cumulative feedback relationship between unconscious cognitive processes and overt conscious ones, which continuously and simultaneously interact to help construct what we consciously experience. All this is outlined in the "Questions of Viśālamati" chapter of the sūtra, which deals with "the secrets of *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*."[123] The chapter first explains that *citta* refers to *ālayavijñāna* and then proceeds to unpack some of its synonyms. Succeeding passages describe its specific characteristics and its ongoing feedback with overt cognitive processes.

The first passage describes how *ālayavijñāna*, "the *citta* with all the seeds," arises in dependence on various conditions:

> In cyclic existence with its six destinies, such and such beings are born as such and such a type of being. They come into existence and arise in the womb of beings. . . .
>
> There, at first, the mind with all the seeds (*sarvabījakaṃ cittam*) matures, congeals, grows, develops, and increases,[124] depending

123. We will be drawing on the translation of the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* here in Waldron 2003.

124. This passage has been reconstructed by Schmithausen (1987, 356n508) as (*sarvabijam

> on the twofold substratum/appropriation (*upādāna*)—that is, (1) the appropriation of the material sense faculties along with their supports, and (2) the appropriation that consists of our tendencies (*vāsanā*) toward proliferating everyday expressions about characteristics, names, and preconceptions.[125] (5.2)

This wonder of concision cries out for explication. First, the text is discussing how beings transition from one lifetime to the next, not as an unchanging soul or *ātman*, but as a stream of *citta* that carries along with it our karmic potentialities and habitual tendencies in the form of seeds. In this respect, it is considered the reconnecting *citta* (*pratisaṃdhicitta*). This *citta* with all the seeds, moreover, "matures, grows, and develops" *in dependence on* specific conditions. Note that, like other formulations of *vijñāna*, this follows the syntax of dependent arising. This is often overshadowed by the more static metaphors of seeds and storage, leading many interpreters, both old and new, to substantialize and reify this dynamic layer of ongoing cognitive processes.

The text then describes the two *appropriations* upon which this *ālayavijñāna* dependently arises. The first is our sense faculties. Like *vijñāna* in early Buddhism, *ālayavijñāna* only arises when something impinges upon the faculties, as we've noted and will discuss further below. The second condition by which *ālayavijñāna* "matures, grows, and increases" is the influence of names, concepts, and characteristics—in effect, culture. It states that our unconscious cognitive processes (*ālayavijñāna*) are informed not only by our individual bodily structures, the first condition, but also by the collective influences of "our tendencies toward proliferating everyday expressions about characteristics, names, and preconceptions"—in Sanskrit, *nimitta-nāma-vikalpa-vyavahāra-prapañca-vāsanā-upādāna*.

What does this proliferating string of terms mean? In what sense are they "appropriations"? The term *upādāna*[126] in Pāli and Sanskrit is usually translated as "grasping," "clinging," or "appropriation," as in the aggregates subject

cittaṃ) *vipacyate saṃmūrcchati vṛddhiṃ virūḍhim vipulatām āpadyate*. This closely parallels passages found in Pāli texts such as SN 22.54 and DN III 228 (*Saṅgīti Sutta*): *viññāṇaṃ... vuddhiṃ virūḷhiṃ vepullam āpajjeyya*.

125. *Sādhiṣṭhāna-rūpīndriya-upādāna*; translation in Waldron 2003, 39. BTG 5.2.

126. *Upādāna* is composed of the prefix *upa*, "towards, near, together with," plus the noun *ādāna*, "receiving, taking for oneself" (SED, 136).

to clinging (*upādāna-skandha*), the processes we identify with and "take as our own" (the etymology of "ap-propriate," *ad* + *proprius*). The extended meaning of *upādāna* is the "fuel, supply, substratum by means of which an active process is kept alive or going" (PED, 149). In other words, our basic cognitive processes are kept going because we constantly cling to and identify with our bodies, thoughts, and feelings, our hopes, dreams, and fears, which comprise who we think we are—who I imagine "I am." In short, this *ālaya* awareness, with all these complex appropriations, is the locus of our deepest sense of self-identification. *Ālaya* awareness thus arises by grasping onto and "taking as one's own" not just our bodily processes, but also our predispositions toward images, names, preconceptions, and so on. And these refer to a multiplicity of perceptual, conceptual, linguistic, and cultural influences, all of which we have seen in previous phases of Buddhism:

- The signs (*nimitta*), the basic characteristics by which one thing is distinguished from another—and whose reification leads to deception in the *Diamond Sūtra*
- The names (*nāma*) and conventions of everyday speech (*vyavahāra*), which befuddle us when we imagine they refer to essential characteristics (7.4) but which are nonetheless indispensable for teaching the ultimate (MMK 24.10)
- The concepts (*vikalpa*) that Nāgārjuna says (MMK 18.5) arise from proliferation (*prapañca*) and give rise to karma and *kleśa*, and whose (proto-)categorizations, as we saw in early Buddhism, preconfigure many of our conscious perceptions
- The proliferating tendencies (*prapañca*), whose runaway ruminations reflect the rabbit hole of discursive mental chatter and reflexive self-consciousness
- Our predispositions or imprints (*vāsanā*)[127] toward all of the above, which constitute the basis, substratum, or fuel (*upādāna*) informing our deepest drives

127. *Vāsanā*, "perfumations, traces, impressions," or "imprints," has a long history in India. It can be traced either to the root *vās*, "to stay, abide, dwell, remain," or to a homophonous root meaning "to perfume" (PED, 604, 610). As a psychological factor, the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* defines it as "the impression of anything remaining unconsciously in the mind, the present consciousness of past perceptions, knowledge derived from memory" (SED, 947).

It is worth taking some time to contemplate how much all these influence our lives.

Their initial implications, though, are clear enough: our ordinary sense perceptions and conceptions are not wholly formed by external stimuli alone. We do not first perceive the world "as it is," as "raw data," and only thereafter construct images of it. Rather, our sensory and cognitive faculties are *structured to only respond* to certain kinds of stimuli. That is, there are specific cognitive schemas, like templates, that constantly operate at a subliminal level and that serve to *pre-structure* the objects we perceive as well as the concepts we conceive. Among these structuring influences are our tendencies toward runaway thoughts, conceptual proliferations, and imaginations triggered by names, concepts, and identifying characteristics (*nimitta*). And despite the focus on individual minds that we find in traditional Buddhism, these unconscious processes are also colored and imprinted by our social and cultural upbringings. Indeed, we could hardly operate in our physical and social worlds were this *not* the case.[128] All of these continuously, unconsciously, and automatically influence the way that we experience and engage our worlds, moment by moment, day in and day out.

The text now begins to outline the dynamic interactive relationship between our bodily faculties, our cognitive objects, and our subconscious and conscious forms of awareness—that is, their dependent arising. First, it gives etymological glosses for some synonyms of *ālayavijñāna*.

> This awareness (*vijñāna*) is also called the *appropriating awareness* (*ādānavijñāna*) because the body is grasped and appropriated by it.
>
> It is also called the *ālaya* awareness because it dwells in and attaches to[129] this body in a common destiny.
>
> It is also called *citta* because it is heaped up (*ācita*) and accu-

128. Mlodinow 2012, esp. chap. 7, "Sorting People and Things."

129. Based upon Chinese renderings, Schmithausen (1987, 289 nn. 181 and 183) suggests these verbs as derivatives of *li* or *ālī*: "*ālayanapralayanatām*" or "*ālīyanapralīyanatām*," "to dwell in and stick to, or be attached to," such that *ālayavijñāna* "dwells in" and "sticks to" the body.

> mulated (*upacita*) by visual forms, sounds, smells, flavors, tangibles, and [mental] dharmas.[130] (5.3)

These passages outline the feedback relationship between our unconscious and conscious cognitive processes. As a complexly structured strata of subliminal awareness, *ālayavijñāna* "grasps onto and appropriates" our embodied sense faculties, which respond to specific stimuli in specific ways. These cognitive structures influence how and what we perceive—the sights, sounds, smells, and so forth—whose imprints are "heaped up" and "accumulated" in our subliminal stream of *citta*. The cumulative effect of these imprints in turn help preconfigure later conscious perceptions.

In one of its significant departures from other Buddhist traditions, both *ālayavijñāna* and the six manifest forms of *vijñāna* are now said to occur not just sequentially, but simultaneously:

> The six groups of cognitive awareness[131] occur *supported* by and *depending* on the appropriating awareness. . . . Of these, visual awareness occurs supported by a visual form and the eye accompanied by consciousness. Simultaneously and in conformity with that visual awareness, a mental awareness conceptualizing (*vikalpaka manovijñāna*) that object occurs at the same time with the same object.
>
> If two, three, four, or five groups of sensory awareness occur simultaneously, then *only one* mental awareness conceptualizing that same object occurs at the same time having the same object.
>
> One can compare this to a large stream of water: if the conditions for the arising of a single wave are present, then only a single wave arises. If the conditions for the arising of two or many waves are present, then two or many waves arise, but the stream of water is neither interrupted nor exhausted in its current.[132] (5.4–5)

130. Waldron 2003, 96.

131. *Vijñānakāya*, a "consciousness group," refers to the three components of cognition: a cognitive object, a sense faculty, and a form of cognitive awareness.

132. Waldron 2003, 97.

We now have nearly the full picture. Our subconscious processes (*ālaya-vijñāna*) "grow, develop, and increase," influenced both by the sense faculties and the accumulated imprints (*vāsanā*) from past experiences, including all our cultural concepts, classifications, and the tendencies to runaway associations that accompany them. These specific influences—no blank slate here—simultaneously support all moments of conscious awareness, influencing how and what we consciously experience. Our experiences of these objects "heap up" or accumulate similar imprints, which then strengthen those subconscious processes, which in turn support subsequent conscious experiences, and so on. In short, we most readily see and hear and think about the objects and thoughts that we are accustomed to seeing, hearing, and thinking about. And each time certain experiences reoccur they strengthen their subliminal imprints. Though still in rough outline, this is a theory of dynamic cognitive constructivism based upon a feedback relationship between diverse modes of conscious and unconscious cognitive processes.

Though the feedback processes depicted so far are largely synchronic, occurring simultaneously or between immediately succeeding moments, the diachronic or long-term patterns they give rise to are just as important. After all, in the first passage we looked at above, *ālayavijñāna* is taking rebirth and arising in a new body. We could think of this in terms of the metaphor of a mindstream—echoing Milinda's examples in the first chapter. A river is comprised of the riverbed, the underlying currents of water, and the surface waves on top (the sense faculties, *ālayavijñāna*, and the manifest forms of awareness, respectively). Just as the riverbed only comes about by the stream of water repeatedly flowing over and eroding it, so the contours of the riverbed in turn shape the speed and direction of subsequent streams. These are like the body and our embodied cognitive processes, which mutually affect and shape each other over time. In addition, the waves on the surface of a river arise *both* supported by the currents beneath it and buffeted by the gusts of wind above it. So, too, our conscious experiences are both supported by subconscious processes, which are internally structured, and simultaneously instigated by external stimuli—and these, in turn, affect these underlying currents.

Finally, the rising and falling of each wave is always at the same time a modification of the river current itself—a modification of the stream of

citta. The waves and currents do not refer to separate streams but to distinct *layers* of the same stream, which are conditioned by different kinds of structures and stimuli. The gist of this model is that our lives are constantly developing through multiple, mutually interacting sets of influences and processes: between our living bodies, our conscious and unconscious cognitive schemas and processes, and our surrounding environment, the stimuli for the sights, sounds, and smells that "heap up."

What, then, is this *environment*? As we have seen, in Buddhist cognitive theory, *vijñāna* arises in dependence on the sense faculties and sense objects, the internal and external sense-spheres, respectively. So too for *ālayavijñāna*. In addition to the internal conditions discussed so far, the sūtra (8.37.1) states that the object of *ālayavijñāna* is "the unconscious perception of the stable common world."[133] (This will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.) Even when unaware of it, the world around us is constantly impinging upon our senses, and we are constantly readjusting ourselves in relation to it, a process called *proprioception*. This allows us to walk around without paying too much attention to the walls, floors, and doors in our environment. We usually only become aware of this under certain conditions, such as when sitting in a stationary vehicle and the one next to us starts moving. This elicits a sudden sinking feeling in our stomach, as we're momentarily unsure which vehicle is moving. This is the subliminal awareness of a stable, external world—"the unconscious perception of the stable common world"—evoked by the subtle stimuli that are always impinging on our faculties.

There is, though, more at play here than our ability to move securely through the world, which most of us mostly take for granted. We also largely take for granted the various linguistic and cultural categories (*vikalpa*) with which we have been raised. As we saw in earlier Buddhist models, the objects we cognize are *correlative* with our cognitive faculties. That is, we can only see or hear the stimuli our faculties are structured to respond to—visible and audible objects are therefore defined as much by the structure of

133. **Asaṃvidita-sthira-bhājana-vijñapti*. See Schmithausen 1987, 385n629, for textual variants of this passage and reconstruction of the Sanskrit.

their respective faculties as they are by the stimuli impinging upon them.[134] Similarly, the object of our subliminal awareness (*ālayavijñāna*), the "stable common world," is also correlative with how our subliminal cognitive processes are structured. Our subliminal perceptions are defined as much by the implicit categorizations of "our tendencies (*vāsanā*) toward proliferating everyday expressions about characteristics, names, and preconceptions" as by the stimuli impinging upon our faculties. What does this entail?

These subliminal processes, based on our predispositions and so on, provide the supporting cognitive templates by which our ongoing flux of experience is categorized, not as an amorphous barrage of sensorial input, which would be wholly dysfunctional, but as preconfigured objects and entities: the stereotypes and so forth that appear in the guise of the names, signs, concepts, and conventions of our language and culture—all of which occurs automatically and unconsciously.

This is why, for example, speakers of languages in which common nouns have a grammatical gender have specifically gendered associations with everyday objects; and why speakers of languages that use only cardinal directions—north, south, east, west—in lieu of bodily referents—front, back, left, right—are never *un*able to identify these cardinal directions. Even when investigators spin them around in a chair blindfolded in a windowless room, they still always know which way is north and south—and yet cannot say how or why they know this (Deutscher 2010). It is not hard, then, to imagine the kinds of implicit biases that "our tendencies toward proliferating everyday expressions about characteristics, names, and preconceptions" unconsciously carry into our complex interpersonal, social, and political lives.

These concepts are not to be reified either

Having presented this explicit model of cognitive constructivism centered on *ālayavijñāna* and couched in terms of dependent arising, the sūtra now addresses the questions raised at the start of this chapter: Why do we so readily imagine there are fixed and unchanging entities in the world? Why is it so hard to understand that what appear to be separate *selves* and *objects* are products of complex constructive processes—and often collective ones

134. See Oyama 2000, 38, quoted in note 33 above.

at that? Short answer: we experience the world in terms of fixed entities and reified essences because *our experiences are already pre-structured*; they depend upon deeply embedded and embodied unconscious dispositions that have been informed by our linguistic, social, and cultural categories and conditioning.

Insofar as this cognitive model helps us understand how and why we impute unchanging essences onto the flow of experience, it also helps us more deeply understand the *three natures*. A telling passage in the meditation chapter (7.10) connects these two processes. Our propensity to impute essences, the text says, develops from previous experience, particularly by the imprints left by linguistic conventions. Based on these, the essences imagined in the *imagined nature* become the rubric through which the other two natures are understood. The Buddha taught the three absences of nature to remedy this, because beings tend to

> superimpose[135] an imaginary essence onto the dependent nature and the real nature and because they designate the dependent nature and the real nature in terms of the characteristics of an imaginary essence.
>
> While they designate them in this way, their minds, which are suffused with designations, become confined to such designations and predisposed toward them.
>
> On this basis, they wrongly conceive the dependent nature and the real nature in terms of the characteristics of an imaginary essence." (7.10)

We tend to think in terms of essences, exemplified by the conventional designations of the imaginary nature, and then, the sūtra says, we superimpose these essences onto the dependent and real natures—onto the way things dependently arise and how they ultimately are—and this prevents us from understanding either the dependent or real natures. This occurs because the process of imputing essences suffuses our *citta* with predispositions toward conventional designations, reinforcing their imprints (*vāsanā*). As the imprints of signs, names, concepts, and conventions more

135. *Sgro btags*; *samāropa*.

deeply shape our subliminal processes, they come to color all our conscious experiences and prevent us from recognizing our own constructive activities, the dependent nature, and what is ultimately so, the thusness of the real nature.

This plays out in several ways. "Superimposing imaginary essences onto the dependent nature" includes considering objects and subjects as if they were truly separable, with their own independent essences, rather than, as with the dependent nature, seeing objects and subjects as *inter*dependent and their apparent *in*dependence as something constructed and imagined. This occurs whether we are asserting the existence of objects while disregarding the role of subjects, as in realism, or inversely, asserting the existence of subjects while denying the existence of objects, as in idealism. These twin reifications are flip sides of the same imaginary coin—and *neither* of them are the view of dependent nature/arising. Ironically, this superimposition also explains how *ālayavijñāna* and *vijñaptimātra* can be misinterpreted as if they were essences that "truly exist," rather than methods to analyze and rectify how these reifications arise.

These insights are similar to the conclusions of modern cognitive scientists like Paul Bloom and Michael Gazzaniga: due to our evolved cognitive processes, human beings are predisposed to be naïve realists, natural dualists, and innate essentialists.[136] Gazzaniga, for example, explains that "our brain processes have been selected over time to organize the world in specific categories and assign different properties to these categories"—that is, to impute essences that we identify as "the part that makes you *you* and me *me*." Similarly, we "infer that each species has an underlying causal nature, or essence." These tendencies are innate and develop in human beings by default: "children are born believing in essences; it is not something they are taught." Nor are these processes that we consciously choose or easily observe: "We cannot consciously feel what our brains are doing when they are performing unconscious processes." Indeed, it is difficult to even iden-

136. Bloom 2005, 199: "Children are dualists in the same way that they are essentialists, realists, and moralists. They are dualists in the sense that they naturally see the world as containing two distinct domains, what Wellman calls 'physical object and real event' and 'mental states and entities'—what I have described as bodies and souls."

tify, let alone rectify, these processes. And the very attempt to assess the validity of such essences, Gazzaniga laments,

> is a *conscious*, tedious process that most people are unwilling or unable to do. It takes energy and perseverance and training. It can be counterintuitive. It is called analytical thinking. It is not common and is difficult to do . . . it is what science is about. (Gazzaniga 2008, 247ff. and 273ff.)

Buddhists, of course, not only want to discern our unconscious and naive assumptions about reality; they also want to counter the deep hold these assumptions have on our hearts and minds, to dispel our enchantment with the imputed essences of fixed identity. These imputed essences may be of race, gender, or ethnicity—our current concerns—or they may refer to the more existential sense of being a disembodied entity essentially isolated from the world around us, the Cartesian dualism that Gazzaniga sets out to investigate.[137] This is also the task of Buddhist teaching, to provide viable methods to liberate us from our deep-seated cognitive and affective habits.

Accordingly, the sūtra's chapter on the "secrets of *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*" closes with an important, characteristically Mahāyāna, twist. Bodhisattvas are not skilled in the secrets of *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna* simply because they are knowledgeable in these doctrines. Rather, they are

> skilled in ultimate meaning because each one within him/herself does not see appropriation *as though it were real*, does not see appropriating consciousness, nor storing, nor the storehouse consciousness, nor accumulation, nor mind, nor visible forms, nor visual consciousness . . . they do not see objects of thought, nor thinking consciousness [as though real].
>
> Viśālamati, it is on this account that they are called

137. We seek to understand "why most people *believe* [body and mind] are separate and why even people who don't believe they are separate act as if they are separate. Why do we think of a person as being more than just a body?" Gazzaniga 2008, 247.

> bodhisattvas skilled in the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness, and are so described by the Tathāgata.[138] (5.6)

Once one has seen through these mental constructions, these illusions fostered by the magic show of language and culture, there is no need to grasp onto the deconstructive analyses that demonstrate their falsity, nor the psychological analyses that explain how they arise, nor the intense practices that liberate us from them—there is, in short, no further need for all the rigmarole of Yogācāra Buddhism.

This crucial caveat is, alas, repeatedly stated in Yogācāra texts yet is repeatedly ignored. As the following verse suggests, this is why the Buddha hesitated to even teach *ālayavijñāna*: it is so easy to reify and appropriate it as a fixed self, as one of the imputed entities of the imagined nature, rather than, as the sūtra itself repeatedly shows, a dependently arisen form of *vijñāna*, *a là* the dependent nature. The "Questions of Viśālamati," thus ends with this poignant warning:

> The appropriating consciousness, profound and subtle,
> like a violent current, flows with all the seeds;
> I have not taught it to the ignorant,
> lest they should imagine it as a self.

Introducing Mere Perception: Critiquing Innate Realism

Along with the three natures and *ālayavijñāna*, the idea of mere perception (*vijñaptimātra*) is one of the signature concepts of classical Yogācāra. It has long been considered the key concept establishing the idealist interpretation of Yogācāra. However, our reading of this section of the sūtra (and Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* in a later chapter) suggests a different interpretation.

138. Keenan 2000, 29; BTG 5.6. The translations of this passage differ. We follow Keenan on the basis of the Chinese (T 16.676.692c): 如實不見阿陀那, "does not see appropriation as though it were real." The Tibetan (D 106, 13b4–6) reads: ... *mi mthong la, de yang yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du yin pa.*

So far, the sūtra has framed the problem of ignorance, or mis-knowing, in terms of our imputation of essences onto the fluid reality of the world, and it has argued that the appearances resulting from this largely arise from the underlying constructive processes associated with *ālayavijñāna*. Since we suffer from our blind enchantment with these superimposed appearances, the process of recognizing them as mere constructs, mere perceptions, is a crucial step on the path to liberation. Once again, we need to see the magic show for what it is.

As we have seen, these constructive processes occur mostly unconsciously, so that their *conjured objects* appear to exist on their own, independent of and external to us. We all feel this. When we look around, we see tables and chairs and people; when we look inward, we not only see passing thoughts and images, we intuit that we are an entity that stands apart from, observes, and experiences all those things. In this sense, we are all naïve realists, intuitively feeling that we are independent subjects in here experiencing independent objects out there. We do not fully appreciate that our perceptions only appear in the particular form they do—as fixed, discrete entities—because they are already structured by our unconscious cognitive schemas, classifications, and dispositions.[139] This is the role the concept of *mere perception* plays in the sūtra: to help us see that the selves and objects we take for granted are mere constructs, mere presentations. It is a crucial, albeit penultimate, step in waking up to, and thereby freeing ourselves from, enchantment with our own constructive processes.

The term *vijñapti* derives from a causative form of the verbal root *jñā*, "to perceive, understand, know." Its basic meaning is "to make known, inform."[140] A near-literal translation of *vijñapti* would be "the cognized" ("ize" is a causative suffix) insofar as what is perceived has been *made known* (in medical parlance: a *presentation*). We could also call it "a percept." It is often translated as "representation," in the sense that it represents or stands

139. Metzinger 2009, 7: "First, our brains generate a world-simulation, so perfect that we do not recognize it as an image in our minds. Then, they generate an inner image of ourselves as a whole . . . we are unable to experience and introspectively recognize our self-models as models. A conscious world-model active in the brain is transparent if the brain has no chance of discovering that it is a model—we look right through it, directly onto the world, as it were."

140. *Vijñapti* means "advertisement" in Hindi. See Hall 1986 for an analysis of this term.

for something, as an image stands for an object.[141] We will translate it as "perception" to highlight its experiential immediacy. To say that apparent objects are *mere perceptions* is to say that although they *appear* to be separate from our cognitive processes, we do not experience them apart *from* those processes. They are inseparable from the interdependent processes outlined in the formula of dependent arising—which, we remember, is the sūtra's definition of the dependent nature.

Tellingly, the term *vijñapti* is introduced in the chapter on meditation, the "Questions of Maitreya." It begins with a description of the path to awakening from our imaginary imputations and from the futile desires they lead to. To this end, bodhisattvas are enjoined to practice both *śamatha*, calming or concentration meditation, and *vipaśyanā*, analytic insight meditation, both of which have been central to Buddhism from its earliest days. These passages lead quickly into a brief discussion of *vijñaptimātra* and its sense and function on the path. We will paraphrase this section of the sūtra, interspersed with direct quotations.

> In the practice of calming (*śamatha*) one concentrates on nonconceptual images, while the object of insight meditation is a conceptual image (8.2).[142] The sūtra briefly describes these practices, working through the traditional three stages of hearing, contemplating, and meditating.
>
> First, the bodhisattvas hear the various teachings and then contemplate and consider their meaning. Then, removing to a secluded spot, they attend to the teaching they have contemplated and "continuously direct their attention inward" (8.3) toward the thought (*citta*) that contemplated that teaching until they achieve mental and physical flexibility—that is, concentration without fatigue or mental turmoil. This is calming meditation.
>
> Thereupon, they apply themselves to the meaning of the

141. *Representation*, though, implies an independent object already standing apart from our cognitive processes, the very notion that *vijñaptimātra* is calling into question.

142. BTG 8.2. **Nirvikalpaṃ pratibimba*, **savikalpaṃ pratibimba*. We have modified terminology for consistency.

doctrines they have contemplated *in the images* they meditated upon by thoroughly "differentiating, discerning, considering, and examining" them (8.3). In other words, they now use the flexible minds they have assiduously cultivated to analyze the images they have previously focused on so intently. This is insight meditation.

After some clarifying remarks, the bodhisattva Maitreya then asks: Is the image perceived in contemplation the same as or different than *citta*? The Buddha answers: It is not different, because that "image is merely a perception." In fact, he continues, the object of awareness is *nothing but a perception* (8.7).[143]

What does all this mean? Let's first try to discern its meaning from the passages that follow, which we again both quote and paraphrase. The sūtra continues:

Maitreya asks, if the image that one perceives in meditation is not different from that *citta*, "Can this very *citta* investigate itself?"

The Buddha replies: no dharma apprehends any dharma whatsoever, but the *citta* appears that way. For example, based on an initial object, one sees a similar form in a mirror. The form and image *appear* to be distinct objects. "Likewise, the mind arising as [if it were conscious of an object] and what is called its image, the object of concentration, *appear as if they were* distinct objects." (8.7)

Maitreya then asks if the "mental images naturally present to beings, such as the appearance of material form and so forth," are also not different from *citta*. The Buddha confirms they are not different; "However, foolish beings with erroneous ideas do not

143. BTG 8.7 reads: "cognition is constituted by the mere representation that is the referential object [of this cognition]." See BTG notes 180 and 181 on this crucial passage; the point is that "the image (*pratibimba*) that is the object of concentration is not distinct from mind because mind is constituted by a representation that is the actual object of this cognition."

> understand just as it is that images are nothing but perceptions (*vijñaptimātra*)." (8.8)

The Buddha then reiterates the distinctive characteristics of calming and insight meditation and describes the union of the two, which leads bodhisattvas *from* the realization that apparent things are mere perceptions *to* a profound appreciation of thusness.

> Maitreya asks: When are bodhisattvas exclusively practicing insight? Answer: When they "direct their attention toward mental appearances without interruption." A mental appearance (*citta-nimitta*) is "the conceptual image that is the object of concentration," the object of insight meditation.
>
> And when are they exclusively practicing calming? Answer: "When they direct their attention toward the unimpeded mind without interruption." An unimpeded *citta* is "the object of mental stillness, the *citta* that takes the image as an object."
>
> The union of these two practices is called "one-pointed *citta*." This is the realization that the image that is the object of concentration "is merely a perception," and, on realizing that, directing one's attention toward true reality, toward thusness. (8.9)

These passages are arguing that ordinary perceptions are like images in a mirror or those conjured in the mind during meditative states, and that none of these are truly separate—"not different"—from the *citta* they are engaged with. Although we do not normally realize this—the things we see and hear all around us certainly appear independent and external enough—we can nevertheless come to realize how our perception of such "objects" arises. We can see that just like a reflection in a mirror *appears* to be different from the initial object but does not occur independently of it, so too the image we conjure in our mind's eye during meditation *appears* to be different from the initial thought (*citta*) whose object it was, but none of this occurs independently of our interdependent cognitive processes. These apparent objects only arise through these processes; in this sense, they are just appearances, just perceptions.

We can extrapolate from the examples of images in the mirror and

images generated in meditation to all of our perceptions. Then, the sūtra argues, we will stop childishly *imagining* that the "objects" we ordinarily cognize are actual entities that have a true existence apart from—"different from"—the interdependent cognitive processes by which they are "made known" (*vijñapti*). Contemplating this, we will eventually come to see them as dependently arisen—that is, as empty. In short, realizing that all cognized phenomena are mere perceptions is a crucial stage on the way to seeing things as they truly are, in all their resplendent thusness.

But, one might ask, why use images conjured in the mind's eye as a model for understanding the dependent arising of our cognitive processes? Why not just look closely at the things we see and hear and touch, and then directly recognize how our perception of them is inextricably implicated in our cognitive processes, just as Buddhists have been arguing since the beginning?

The short answer is that it is easier. Schmithausen (2007, 239) points out that it is much easier to appreciate that the images we *intentionally and repeatedly generate and dissolve* in our mind's eye are inseparable from our cognitive processes, since they have no apparent external referent that constrains their evanescent appearances. It is much harder to realize that the cognized objects that appear to exist independently of ourselves are also constructed by and mediated through our sense faculties, because these constructive processes are inaccessible to conscious awareness.[144]

Although prior to attaining buddhahood we may never directly recognize reality as it is, we can logically infer that all our experiences as such are complex products of our constructive cognitive processes. And when we realize that this is how all perceptions arise—constructed and mediated through our faculties and cognitive schemas—we can eventually come to understand all things *just as they are*: as dependently arisen, empty of essence, and full of thusness. These passages show how the realization of *vijñaptimātra*—that all apparent objects are just percepts—plays a crucial role in the process of undermining our enchantment with appearances.

After detailing other meditation practices, Maitreya then asks: "When the bodhisattvas cultivate calming and insight, what appearances (*nimitta*)

144. Metzinger (2009, 61) makes the same point, albeit without reference to Yogācāra teachings.

do they abandon?" (8.26). This initiates a progressive falling away of all perceptual and conceptual signs and appearances, including those of *each and every* Buddhist doctrine and practice. Through attending to thusness, bodhisattvas abandon the signs and significance (*artha*) of various doctrinal designations: "They discard the letters, meanings, and contexts by not focusing on their essence and by not paying attention to the signs that constitute their basis" (8.26). These practices are designed to counter our tendencies to reify even Buddhist teachings. Just as we saw earlier with *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*, the sūtra extends this exercise to all significance (*artha*) whatsoever.

Since it is not practical to abandon all the signs or appearances all at once, the sūtra lists ten specific aspects of emptiness as antidotes or remedies for grasping onto specific signs (8.30). For example, the sign of viewing the apprehending subject as one's own identity (*satkāyadṛṣṭi*), with the thought "I am this," is dispelled by contemplating the "emptiness of the inner subject." Conversely, analyzing the "emptiness of the outer object" dispels the sign of taking apprehended objects as objects of enjoyment (8.29.3–4). This leads one to abandon the signs of Buddhist practice, even the signs of *vijñaptimātra* and of the ultimate itself:

> The signs of the selflessness of persons and of phenomena, the sign of what is a mere perception, and the sign of the ultimate through which one comprehends the thusness of characteristics—these are eliminated by means of the emptiness of the limitless, the emptiness of the lack of essence, the emptiness of essence of the lack of essence, and the emptiness of the ultimate. (8.29.8)

Then the signs of the aspects of emptiness that serve as antidotes to all these previous signs are themselves dispelled by the "emptiness of emptiness" (8.29.10).

Emptiness is then described as the total absence of the signs of the imagined nature from the dependent and real natures (8.31). Then, having attained both calming and insight, bodhisattvas work toward supreme awakening by meditating on various forms of thusness, continuing to abandon ever more subtle signs of Buddhist concepts. They finally abandon all

conceptuality whatsoever and, with penetrating discernment of thusness in its multiple aspects, attain the *path of seeing*, the point at which a bodhisattva first directly sees reality as it is (8.36).

This lengthy process of using increasingly subtle understandings to abandon first the grosser and then the lesser obscurations and signs is likened to a carpenter's technique of using a smaller peg to remove a larger one (8.36). In this framework, the notion of *vijñaptimātra*—the realization that the objects that appear to exist apart from our cognitive engagement with them are just dependently arisen perceptions—is a critical conceptual tool used at specific stages to free us from the bonds of all images, appearances, and conceptualizations. After which, like all tools, it is put down when its work is done. Like the critical concept of emptiness before it, *vijñaptimātra* is a self-limiting concept—a provisional means on the path to realization, a raft to get to the other shore.

Contextualizing vijñaptimātra

Let's stand back and ask: What work is *vijñapti* doing here? And how does it develop upon earlier Buddhist analyses of our cognitive processes, both historically and within the sūtra itself?

In both the early teachings and Abhidharma, *citta* is the name for our state of mind in general and is often equated with cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) and thought (*manas*). Cognitive awareness, we recall, occurs when a stimulus impinges on one of the faculties and attention is present. These constitute an inseparable pattern, like a business transaction, which by definition has a buyer, a seller, and something exchanged. All three are indispensable for a transaction to occur and are mutually defined by their involvement in that process. Similarly, just as we have no knowledge of an object without cognizing it in some fashion, so too, cognitive awareness does not arise without some stimulus, some object, even one that is a conjured image. These three—stimulus, faculty, and awareness—simply *are* the cognitive process and as such constitute the basic unit of analysis, as the early texts repeatedly state: *the meeting of the three is contact*. Thus, in terms of dependent arising, we ought not imagine that just because they have different names, different designations, these three components are already present independently of each other and are only thereafter brought together in an act of awareness, and that consciousness is an independent

agent actively "cognizing" such objects. That was the view Vasubandhu warned against in his commentary on his *Treasury of Abhidharma*.

Moreover, while their distinct names might suggest they are present prior to or apart from our cognitive processes, this is not an *experiential* fact either. Experientially, we do not perceive an "object" unless and until it is an object of awareness, that is, until something impinges on the faculty with enough intensity to give rise to a moment of awareness. And since what counts as an *object* is dependent on the structure of the faculties it impinges upon, whatever is a tangible, visible, audible, conceivable object is *necessarily* defined by the structure of its respective faculty. All this is entailed by analyses in terms of dependent arising, which the Yogācārins placed at the center of their analyses of the origination and cessation of illusion. Again: the dependent nature is, word for word, dependent arising.

What the notion of *ālayavijñāna* added to this was another layer of dependently arisen cognitive processes, albeit unconscious ones, which are also deeply informed by linguistic and cultural influences and which help explain *how our perceptions take the shape they do*—why they appear to have unchanging characteristics; that is, their imagined nature.

From this perspective, we can see the teaching of *vijñaptimātra* as a contemplative exercise—it occurs in the chapter on meditation—that serves to evoke insight in the practitioner into the constructed nature of our experience, to shift our understanding from the imagined nature, through the dependent nature, and finally to the ultimate thusness of the real nature.

In the analogy in the sūtra, the image in the mirror might initially *seem* to be distinct from the object it reflects, and our awareness of it might *seem* as if it stands apart from both of these. But neither the image nor the object occur wholly independently of each other, nor of the *citta* whose object it is—otherwise, we would never see them in the first place. The simple yet critical point is that whatever we *do* perceive is already implicated in our cognitive processes; it is unavoidably *a perception*. This becomes all the more obvious when we consider the construction and dissolution of images in our mind's eye, where we have more control over the constructive processes, but whose experiential reality, like a reflection in a mirror, is equally compelling.

The text uses these analogies to push us toward the realization that apparently independent objects with their own unchanging or identifiable

characteristics or signs (*lakṣaṇa, nimitta*) cannot be found apart from our cognitive or conceptual imputation of them. Such things can neither be found nor even adequately conceived of apart from a moment of *citta*—nor vice versa. Their *in*dependence is therefore neither logical,[145] ontological, nor psychological. This is what dependent arising entails: when this is, that arises.

The positive intent of these doctrines is to propel beings along the transformative path, a path in which *vijñaptimātra* plays a crucial, yet penultimate, role. Once not only the negative but also the positive work of the concept and practice of *vijñaptimātra* has been accomplished, then it too, along with all the other Buddhist remedies, is readily abandoned on the other shore, "beyond, beyond, and further beyond."

The parting of the ways

The concept of *vijñaptimātra* is interpreted in various contradictory ways, often depending on which question one thinks it is answering. Is it answering a question about *what exists*? Or is it addressing the more central Buddhist question: How do illusions arise, and how do we overcome them? The first is an ontological question, the second epistemological or, more precisely, cognitive. They sum up two quite different interpretations of this concept and, by extension, of Yogācāra as a whole. These differing interpretations reflect an important shift, as the sūtra presents it, from the second to the third turning of the wheel: Are the Mahāyānists proposing views *about* reality or remedies for our afflictions? What, in short, is the "intent" of emptiness and *vijñaptimātra*? How one answers this is largely determined by which framework one is using. As Keenan (1997, 21) astutely observes, "in the history of Mahāyāna thinking, the most crucial arguments occur not over issues within a shared context of meaning, but precisely over shifts in that context itself."

On the one hand, most interpreters in India and Tibet, as well as (until quite recently) most Western scholars, have interpreted the concept of

145. This parallels Nāgārjuna's analyses of the actor and act. We cannot logically refer to an actor independently of an action, nor vice versa. These terms are mutually defined; treating them as separate may be a function of our analyses—provisionally useful and necessary at times—but all too easily reified and even incoherent if we imagine their "essences" are ultimately separable.

vijñaptimātra ontologically, to mean that there simply are no such things as external objects, that the only entity that truly exists is *citta*, and that whatever appears to be "out there" is nothing but a unilateral projection or reflection of this truly existent *citta*. That interpretation focuses on Yogācāra as *cittamātra*, "mind only," and is the basis for the widespread understanding of Yogācāra as a form of metaphysical idealism. That interpretation is more plausible when the passages on *vijñaptimātra* are extracted from their multiple contexts and read as if they were freestanding propositions about reality. But they look rather different if they are interpreted in their own context, as a form of *vijñānavāda* or cognitivism, as providing tools for analyzing how appearances arise and remedying our tendencies to reify those appearances.

To this end, we have contextualized *vijñaptimātra* both in terms of the sūtra as a whole and within the larger trajectory of Buddhist thought. Specifically, we interpreted *vijñaptimātra* in light of the dependent arising of our cognitive processes—given that the sūtra places that formula front and center in its own analyses. The three natures describe how unchanging essences and characteristics are superimposed onto these cognitive processes through the influences of language, concepts, and other predispositions, albeit operating unconsciously (*ālayavijñāna*). All these influences help shape the cognitive objects—the *vijñapti*—that we consciously perceive. Recognizing that these apparent objects are constructs, mere perceptions, is the primary function of *vijñaptimātra* on the path to liberation. Then this, too, along with all the processes designated by the term *mind* are—following the sūtra's admonitions—treated as skillful means, *nominal designations* designed to remedy our reifying tendencies and then finally abandoned.

We can see how this builds upon the previous chapter, in which the early Mahāyānists formulated the idea that "all phenomena are empty" as a remedy to the view of essentialism that they thought had crept into Abhidharma thinking. But the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras were also concerned with the opposite extreme, that emptiness might be misconstrued as simple nonexistence. Hence, the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras as well as Nāgārjuna advocated a middle way that affirmed the validity and utility of conventional discourse, as provisional designations. And these "de-sign-ations"—

giving signs to things—depend in turn on the purposes for which they are devised. At bottom, as the Dalai Lama (Gyatso 2009, 102) clearly puts it, "their identity cannot be separated from the conceptual mind that labels them."

The *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* took up these various strands. It shifted attention away from asking whether dharmas are empty, their ontology, and toward the question of why we are so deeply predisposed to reify things—in short, toward investigating "the conceptual mind that labels them." And to examine this more deeply, we return once again to analyses of our minds and mental processes.

6

Ālayavijñāna: From Our Individual to Collective Worlds

THE *SAṀDHINIRMOCANA SŪTRA* assembled the major Yogācāra doctrines concerning our cognitive processes—the three natures, *ālayavijñāna*, and mere perception. These all underwent significant development over the next few centuries, leading to the classic Yogācāra works associated with the two purported half-brothers, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (fourth to fifth centuries CE). Since our focus is on their cognitive ideas, the next two chapters examine the texts that most systematically address the concepts of *ālayavijñāna* and *vijñaptimātra*, respectively.

The conception of *ālayavijñāna* clearly builds on the concept of *vijñāna* found in the early teachings. The term *vijñāna* was used there both for the ongoing stream of consciousness that persists from one lifetime to the next and for the transient moments of conscious awareness that arise depending on specific, ever-changing conditions—"saṃsāric" and "cognitive" *vijñāna*, respectively. The disjunction between these two aspects of *vijñāna* came to a head in the Abhidharmic analyses of consciousness in the early centuries of the Common Era, producing the Abhidharma Problematic. The most systematic treatments of *ālayavijñāna* in Yogācāra literature—the texts we will be examining—were clearly formulated to address these problems. Couched in the syntax of dependent arising and described in technical Abhidharmic terms, it combines both temporal dimensions of *vijñāna*: this new "*ālaya*" *vijñāna* persists from life to life arising *in a stream of moments* depending on its faculties, objects, and worlds.

The classical Yogācāra model of mind, however, goes beyond the Abhidharma conception of consciousness in two ways. First, this two-tiered model provides a thoroughgoing constructivist theory of perception that, Yogācārins argued, better explains how and why our perceptions—

our *vijñapti*—appear the way they do. And second, it emphasizes how deeply conditioned we are by concepts and the impressions of language (*abhilāpavāsanā*), which profoundly *in-form* the form our perceptions take. This opens the door to a much broader understanding of the unconscious yet collective construction of our *common* perceptions and, by extension, of our common, shared worlds (*bhājanaloka*)—to, in effect, a cultural unconscious. This greatly facilitates our ability to see through our deep-seated, collective illusions.

While the basic outline of these ideas was presented in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, they were more systematically developed in specific sections of the *Stages of Yogic Practice* and the *Summary of Mahāyāna*, both traditionally attributed to Asaṅga. There is considerable overlap in approach and content between these two texts, so we will interweave ideas from both of them.

Why Yogācāra cognitive analyses are couched in Abhidharmic terms

It may be puzzling that these analyses are couched in the technical vocabulary and categories of traditional Abhidharma. As Mahāyāna Buddhists, Yogācārins rejected the Abhidharma claim that dharmas are ultimately real, with their own natures. Nevertheless, they freely used dharmic analyses in their systematic treatments of *ālayavijñāna*. What should we make of this?

Let's recall the larger challenge here. The psycho-spiritual transformations that Indian Buddhists advocate have an experiential as well as a conceptual dimension. Indeed, one of the challenges of any systematic psychology is to maintain a relation and balance between the two. To this end, Buddhist traditions devised useful tools to help us discern and designate our experiences so we can both understand and communicate them more clearly. Historically, as we saw in Pāli texts, the favored mode for analyzing the arising and cessation of suffering in general, and of cognitive processes in particular, was couched in the impersonal terms of dependent arising: when *x* is, *y* arises. Such analyses pervade the Abhidharma literature as well as the Yogācāra texts we are examining.

There are good pragmatic reasons for this. When it is used in conjunction with insight meditation, as it is to this day, this mode of analysis helps us to observe our own psychological patterns—the recurrent relationships between

specific stimuli and our emotional and behavioral reactions. This practice of intentional *depersonalization*, as it were, leads to deeper insight, which in turn helps free us from these patterns. This is expressed in Yogācārins' three-nature theory: our understanding shifts from the imagined nature, with its imagined essences, to the perspective of the dependent nature, expressed in the syntax of dependent arising, which leads to finally understanding the real nature, the ineffable thusness of all phenomena. This pragmatic rationale arguably superseded the claim that dependent arising (or its correlate, emptiness) is a more accurate *representation* of the world. The *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* stated that Buddhist saints "completely and perfectly realize that reality which is inexpressible," but out of concern for the welfare of all beings they *nominally designate* phenomena using conventional terms (1.5). And the conventional terms used by literate Buddhists in this period were dharmas.

In effect, Buddhists needed a common set of conceptual tools with which to carefully analyze their experience and communicate their findings to others. The very term *communication* means "to make common." And for names, terms, and concepts—including dharmas—to communicate and carry explanatory power broadly, they need to be adequately and reliably defined. They need, in short, to have specific characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*). So while, as Mahāyānists, Yogācārins rejected the claim that characteristics refer to inherent essences, they nevertheless used them as working definitions, as *provisional designations*—as we see in Tibetan monastic manuals to this day. We could say that a characteristic is not a characteristic, therefore it is a "characteristic."

The final reason to take analyses of our cognitive processes couched in terms of dharmas seriously is because our authors did. In the texts we are examining, they are clearly concerned with providing a coherent account of these phenomena in dharmic terms. They not only argue that the continuity of karma and the latent afflictions is better explained by this conception of *ālayavijñāna*. But the rationales and arguments they use to describe and defend this newly articulated form of *vijñāna*—this "*ālaya*" *vijñāna*—carefully follow the strictures of dharmic discourse—without, however, accepting Abhidharmic claims of ultimacy. We might note that the commonality, clarity, and utility of dharmic discourse did not depend on the divergent ontological claims of any of the Buddhist schools who used it.

Systematizing the Unconscious: The "Ālaya Treatise" of the *Yogācārabhūmi*

The most systematic presentation of *ālayavijñāna* in any classical Yogācāra text is found in the *Yogācārabhūmi*, or *Stages of Yogic Practice*. This is an encyclopedic text traditionally attributed to Asaṅga, a practice we will follow, but considered by modern scholars to have been compiled over several centuries, between the second and fourth centuries CE. Reflecting this compositional history, it contains many heterogeneous elements, some of which predate distinctively Mahāyāna teachings, such as the *Śrāvakabhūmi*, while many clearly postdate the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*. The text is divided into Basic and Supplementary sections. Within the Basic Section, we find a series of seventeen grounds (*bhūmi*), each presenting a specific set of teachings and practices crucial for progress along the path. The longest of these is the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, well known as a complete guide to the bodhisattva path (Engle 2016).

The chapter in the Supplementary Section entitled *Compendium of Determinations* (*Viniścayasaṃgrahaṇī*) includes two subsections that describe the concept of *ālayavijñāna* in traditional Abhidharmic terms. Schmithausen calls them the "Ālaya Treatise," which consists of the "Proof Portion" and the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion."[146]

In these texts, Asaṅga describes those aspects traditionally associated with the persisting dimension of our mindstream—our karmic potentials, latent afflictions, and progress along the path—in terms of momentary dharmas. The "Proof Portion" presents eight arguments or "proofs" for why the underlying, subliminal stream of cognitive processes—the storehouse consciousness—is able to explain these persisting influences better than other Abhidharma systems. The second portion then systematically describes the mutual conditioning between our unconscious and conscious processes, much as we saw outlined in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* but fully analyzed here in terms of established Abhidharmic categories. We cannot account for all this, Yogācārins argue, without acknowledging the ongoing but unconscious cognitive processes that support, inform, and interact with

146. See Waldron 2003, 101–27 and 178–89, for analysis and translation of this latter portion.

our more conscious processes. Why? This is what the eight proofs first set out to explain.

The "Proof Portion": Why there must be unconscious cognitive processes

We will discuss these proofs in two groups.[147] Proofs 1 and 4 argue that the diachronic dimension traditionally attributed to *vijñāna*—persisting over this and many multiple previous lifetimes—cannot be explained by the six forms of manifest awareness alone. There needs to be something like an *ālayavijñāna* to make sense of it. Other proofs (2, 3, and 5) argue that we cannot even make sense of such synchronic processes as sense perception without an additional and continuous array of cognitive processes that simultaneously underlie and support them.

Asaṅga begins proof 1 by clearly differentiating two kinds of *vijñāna*, evoking the distinctive roles that "saṃsāric" and "cognitive" *vijñāna* played in the early texts. This is the clearest depiction of the differences between these two dimensions of *vijñāna*—between processes that are conscious and those that are not—differences that later texts generally assume without explanation. The arguments in the other proofs all rest upon this systemic distinction.

He first evokes the traditional idea that *vijñāna* enters the body at the time of rebirth (reconnection, *pratisaṃdhi*), appropriates or clings to it (*upādāna*) throughout a single lifetime, and finally departs at the time of death. Only *ālayavijñāna* can do this; the manifesting forms of awareness cannot. Why is this?

I paraphrase the argument as follows:

1. *Ālayavijñāna* arises continuously in an unbroken stream because it arises dependent on the continuous effects of the karmic formations or cognitive schemas (*saṃskāra*) constructed by past actions. *Ālayavijñāna* is a result (*vipāka*) of past actions; it is karmically neutral and so does not lead to new karmic results; and

147. In the *Yogācārabhūmi*, the "Proof Portion" immediately precedes the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion." The chronology of these texts relative to the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* is far from clear. See Schmithausen 1987, 194–96, for a useful stratification of these proofs, summarized in Waldron 2003, 220n26. For an interesting and different understanding of these proofs and of the origins of *ālayavijñāna*, see Yamabe 2013.

unlike the forms of manifest awareness, which arise only in conjunction with specific sense organs, *ālayavijñāna* continuously arises, pervading the entire body.

2. The forms of manifesting awareness (*pravṛttivijñāna*), by contrast, are momentary and discontinuous since they arise dependent only on present conditions (the sense faculties, sense objects, and attention); they are associated karmically with either skillful or unskillful actions and therefore do lead to new karmic results; and since they only arise intermittently in conjunction with their respective faculties, they cannot cling to the body as a whole throughout one's lifetime.

Table. Contrasting *ālayavijñāna* with manifest awareness

Ālayavijñāna	Manifest awareness
continuous	discontinuous
arises conditioned by complexes from the past	arises conditioned by present conditions
karmically neutral	karmically effective (associated with karmic processes)
arises in entire body	arises with specific sense bases

Next, Asaṅga asks in proof 4 how our latent dispositions and potentials for karmic fruition could be continuously transmitted from moment to moment in the stream of *citta*—a process referred to as *seeding*—if only *conscious* forms of awareness occur in each moment. These forms of manifest awareness are discontinuous, depend upon their respective faculties, and are associated with different karmic qualities. Given these differences, how could karmic influences (represented as *seeds*) be effectively transmitted from one moment of consciousness to the next? He frames this as the first problem of *mutual seeding*.

> For what reason is it impossible for the six forms of manifest awareness to be each other's seeds? Because an unskillful [dharma]

> occurs immediately after a skillful one, a skillful one immediately after an unskillful one, an indeterminate one immediately follows after both of these. . . . These [six groups of manifest awareness] cannot properly be seeds [of each other] in this way.

This problem arises from two Abhidharma doctrines: that ***only present moments are real***, and that the succession between them must be fairly uniform—expressed in the term ***homogeneous and immediately antecedent condition*** (***samanantara-pratyaya***). The first problem is that if ***only*** presently occurring dharmas are real, then—to be real—the latent influences (of karma and ***kleśa***) must also somehow be continuously present in ***each and every moment.*** Otherwise, like a flame that has been extinguished, once their continuity has been broken for even a moment, they would no longer have the immediately preceding conditions necessary to reoccur; they would be cut off forever. Were this the case, then even a single moment of profound insight would be tantamount to liberation and there would be no need for further practice—an idea that nearly all schools reject.

The second problem concerns how these underlying potentials could persist in spite of the radically differing states of mind we consciously experience. The doctrine of momentariness entailed that causal influences can be transmitted only between *immediately* contiguous states. But we all have persisting character traits, connected to our latent dispositions, that persist despite our ever-shifting overt states of mind—we can be angry one moment but generous the next, happy and then sad. Feelings such as these are considered a result (*vipāka*) of our past actions, arising from their own seeds when conditions are ripe. But, Yogācārins argue, our shifting forms of "manifest awareness"—each with their distinct faculties, objects, and karmic characteristics—are simply too different from each other for these latent potentialities to be transmitted through them alone. Technically speaking, they are not *homogeneous* enough for immediate succession. Hence, there must be an underlying and *continuously occurring* form of awareness (*ālayavijñāna*) where these diverse potentialities persist—such as the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*'s deep current, the "*citta* with all the seeds," that flows continuously below the shifting waves on the surface. Karmic potentiality is now, in the guise of seeds, being slowly worked into Yogācāra analyses of mind.

In the next set of proofs (2, 3, and 5), Asaṅga argues that discrete, discontinuous conscious processes alone cannot account for even ordinary perception (*vijñapti*) without unconscious processes associated with *ālayavijñāna* underlying and supporting them—and helping *construct how they appear*.

As we have seen, most Buddhist schools maintain that conscious perception involves two steps. First, a visible object impinges on the visual faculty, for example, and visual awareness arises. This visual awareness then impinges, as it were, on the mental faculty (*manas*), and a moment of mental awareness arises. Only then are we consciously aware *that* we are seeing.[148] In the standard model, however, these two moments of awareness—first visual and then mental—occur sequentially, not simultaneously. This is a problem, Asaṅga argues in proof 3:

> because, when one remembers an object (*viṣaya*) that has been perceived in the [immediate] past, the mental awareness that then occurs is unclear. However, the mind that takes place in regard to a present object is not unclear in this way. Thus either the simultaneous occurrence [of both visual and mental awareness] is correct, or [there is] a lack of clarity of the mental awareness.

Most schools agree that mental awareness actually is clear. However, this clarity would not be possible if visual and mental awareness occurred sequentially, Asaṅga argues, since recollection of a past moment is indirect. Therefore both forms of manifest awareness must occur simultaneously, as the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* described. But for that to be possible—since each of the manifest forms of awareness has its own distinctive faculties and cognitive objects—there must be an underlying awareness, *ālayavijñāna*, that arises within the *entire* body and can therefore support the arising of both forms of manifest awareness at the same time.

Proof 2 similarly argues that two kinds of manifest awareness *do* arise simultaneously, citing the fact that we often have *multisensory* experience. How could this be possible if, as most schools insist, distinct forms of manifest awareness only occur sequentially rather than simultaneously? Such

148. AKBh ad 3.30c–d.

distinct forms of awareness—with their own specific conditions (faculties, objects, and attention)—would be too jumbled together for multisensory experience to be coherent. There must therefore be an underlying level of awareness that appropriates *all* the sense faculties, providing a common support for the distinct forms of manifest awareness to arise without getting their signals crossed. This too is explicating in more analytic terms the characteristics of the *ālayavijñāna* model introduced in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

Building upon this, proof 5 introduces the last key component of the Yogācāra model. Our *disposition toward the affliction "I am"* (*asmimāna-anuśaya*) is said to persist until the last stages of the path, and so in standard Abhidharma must be present in each moment until then. Accordingly, our experience is manifold: in each moment we experience this "I am," along with other kinds of perceptions (*vijñapti*). They include, the text goes on to state:

> the perception (*vijñapti*) of the world,
> the perception of the [physical] basis,
> the perception "[This is] I," and
> the perception of sense objects.
>
> These perceptions (*vijñapti*) are experienced as occurring simultaneously moment to moment. It is not tenable for there to be diverse functions like this within a single moment of a single form of manifest awareness.

Such experiences, whose components we will examine presently, could not be explained if we think that conscious perceptions only occur in one mode at a time, but they readily make sense if we recognize that multiple perceptual processes occur simultaneously, supported by a common, stable level of subliminal cognitive processes. *Ālayavijñāna* constitutes the deep-level sentience for such disparate conscious experiences to occur. This is the basic model that the remainder of the "Ālaya Treatise" will now delineate in delectable Abhidharmic detail.

How Unconscious Processes Help Construct Perceptions

In the section of the *Yogācārabhūmi* called the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion,"[149] Asaṅga offers the most systematic presentation of *ālayavijñāna* in Yogācāra literature. He first presents it in terms of its *perpetuation* (*pravṛtti*)[150]—how *ālayavijñāna* serves as the hub around which our compulsive behavioral patterns are strengthened through persistent repetition—and he equates it with the ongoing stream of *citta*, that persists uninterruptedly throughout one's saṃsāric career. It is analyzed here in traditional Abhidharma categories of:

1. Its distinctive supports and objects (*ālambana*)
2. Its associated psychological processes (*caitta*)
3. Its simultaneous and reciprocal relationship with conscious cognitive processes

Conversely, in the second part, Asaṅga describes its eventual cessation (*nivṛtti*)—how, through practice, *ālayavijñāna* can be weakened and eventually eradicated on the path to liberation. This corresponds to the cessation of *vijñāna* described by other schools. Since in our last chapter we will focus on the path to liberation as presented in another key Yogācāra text, the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, here we focus more on the *Pravṛtti* part.

Subliminal perception: how our worlds correlate with our predispositions

As in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, this first section describes how this "*ālaya*" *vijñāna* arises in dependence upon specific inner and outer "supports" or conditions—that is, how our inner faculties and predispositions correlate with a vague "sense of the world around us."

149. For a full translation, see Waldron 2003, 178–89.

150. The term *pravṛtti* has the sense of "arise, manifest, commence" (*pra* + *vṛt*, SED 693) or, in this context, "advance, progress, or perpetuate." As we saw, it is also used for the six "manifesting" forms of cognitive awareness (*pravṛttivijñāna*).

> Briefly, *ālayavijñāna* arises with two supports: with the perception (*vijñapti*) of the inner appropriation (*upādāna*);[151] and with the perception of the external, shared world whose aspects are not clearly delineated.

Note that *ālayavijñāna* here is *not* a faculty that actively cognizes objects, nor is it the subject of cognition as opposed to its object. Like the example of two hands clapping in the *Questions of King Milinda*, *ālayavijñāna* arises with the *interaction*, the coming together of the "inner appropriation" and an unclear "external shared world." As in early Buddhism, these are correlative with each other.

First, what is the "inner substratum" or "appropriation"? It consists of

> the material sense faculties along with their bases, as well as the predispositions toward attachment to imagined natures.[152]

The second component of this—our predispositions to see the world in terms of the apparently real entities of the imagined nature—parallels the passage in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* that describes it as "the appropriation that consists of our tendencies toward proliferating everyday expressions about signs, names, preconceptions" (see pages 174–75 above).

Asaṅga then explains the vague perceptions that are *correlative* with these predispositions:

> The "perception of the external shared world whose aspects are not clearly delineated" means: the continuous, uninterrupted perception (*vijñapti*) of the continuity of the shared world *based upon* that very *ālayavijñāna* that has inner appropriation as its support.

This vague perception of the "external shared world" occurs outside our conscious awareness. It is commonly shared, continuously occurring, and correlative with our "inner appropriation"—with our material sense

151. See the fuller description of *upādāna* in chapter 5 above, page 174.

152. *Parikalpita-svabhāva-abhiniveśa-vāsanā*. See Waldron 2003, 179.

faculties and the predispositions toward all the names, categories, and so on of the imagined nature. Let's examine this.

Asaṅga states that *ālayavijñāna* arises supported by conditions that are "subtle, difficult to discern, not clearly delineated." In short, they are subliminal. The subtle perception of our shared world is *correlative* with the subtle impressions of the names and concepts of our imagined entities, which are constantly shaping our underlying, equally subtle *ālaya* awareness.

How does this work? As a species, we humans share not only similar faculties but also similar dispositions, which help us navigate our surrounding world in similarly human ways—as compared to bats, butterflies, or bacteria. The ways we subliminally experience our world are continuously but unconsciously shaped by our embodied but subliminal categories and concepts, a relation Asaṅga illustrates with the example of an oil lamp:

> How *ālayavijñāna* [arises] in relation to the supports of inner appropriation and of the shared [world] is similar to a burning flame, which, on the basis of oil and wick, arises inwardly while it emits light outwardly.

The appropriation or substratum (*upādāna*), we recall, is the "fuel that keeps the process going." Based on the "oil" or fuel of our common predispositions and prejudices, in conjunction with the "wick" of our material faculties—their inner supports—we subtly experience outwardly worlds that are preconfigured in just these terms. That is, our shared *worlds* are a reflection of our shared imagined entities. The idea in the Pāli texts that *loka* is correlative with the structure of our faculties is transposed here to the subliminal or unconscious level and is explicitly said to be common or shared. We will return to this at the end of the chapter.

This is, moreover, an ongoing process. Our faculties and predispositions are always being impinged upon by the vague external world, continuously giving rise to forms of subliminal awareness. As Asaṅga puts it, *ālayavijñāna* is "always there, not sometimes this and sometimes that." Unless our senses are deeply impaired, we always have an implicit sense of our bodies in relation to our surroundings, called *proprioception*. Similarly, we are always experiencing our subtle social and cultural world in terms of our subtle, yet shared conventional categories and concepts. As long as these enabling

conditions persist, as long as we are interacting in such environments, then *ālayavijñāna* "continuously arises in a stream of moments."

Lest we reify this too, Asaṅga warns that:

> *Ālayavijñāna* should be understood as momentary regarding [its] objects, and though it continuously arises in a stream of instants, it is neither singular (*ekatva*) nor eternal.[153]

This is an important caution, one we encountered in the previous chapter. Asaṅga is suggesting that the term *ālayavijñāna* refers to a *set* of nonconscious processes rather than to a singular, unchanging entity. It is part of a complex of interdependent cognitive processes that arise from moment to moment in dependence upon specific internal and external conditions—the same kinds of conditions that give rise to forms of cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) in other Buddhist models. The main innovation so far has been to recognize that these processes, their conditioning influences, and the constructed cognitive objects and worlds they help shape, are both collective and subliminal, that is, "hard to discern."

Also like other forms of *vijñāna*, *ālayavijñāna* does not do this cognitive work all by itself. It is accompanied by the same cognitive processes that accompany each moment of conscious awareness (see page 95), only these too are "subtle and hard to perceive even for the wise." The subtle processes (*caitta*) that accompany each ordinary mind-moment are attention, contact, sensation or feeling, apperception, and intention. When they accompany *ālayavijñāna*, however, they are too weak or subtle to register as either pleasurable or painful. Nor are they strong enough to cause new karma, hence they are karmically indeterminate. These subtle processes do not overwhelm or impede our conscious processes; therefore they can occur simultaneously with all kinds of overt states of mind. In other words, there are multiple, complex, often unknowable processes constantly occurring in our mindstream—something mainstream Abhidharma, as a "theory of consciousness," could not articulate in dharmic terms.

Thus far, Asaṅga has described *ālayavijñāna* as a continuously arising

153. Waldron 2003, 180; D 4038, 425: *gcig pa nyid ni ma yin no*. The last phrase, "nor eternal," appears only in Xuanzang's Chinese (T 1579.30.580a18): [illegible].

but strictly momentary subliminal awareness of the surrounding world, supported by and correlative with our bodily faculties and conceptual and cultural categories. It is also accompanied by other subliminal cognitive processes. It is, in short, a theory of a collective, *cognitive unconscious*.

Mutual conditioning between conscious and unconscious processes

Asaṅga next describes how our conscious and unconscious cognitive processes are always interacting over time, creating the feedback cycles—the habits—we get caught up in. This occurs through a *simultaneous* and *mutually conditioning* (*anyonyapratyayatā*) relationship between the underlying, persisting stream of *citta* accompanied with all the seeds—that is, *ālayavijñāna*—and the six forms of momentary manifest awareness. The relationship between them is described here in strictly dharmic terms and thus begins to directly address the Abhidharma Problematic.

We saw the outline of this in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*: the objects of manifest awareness are "heaped up" in *ālayavijñāna*, which supports the arising of new moments of manifest awareness, which then heap up some more, and so on. As befitting his scholarly approach, Asaṅga depicts this first step more analytically: "the forms of manifest awareness serve as the condition of *ālayavijñāna* in two ways: (1) by nurturing (or *fattening*, *paripuṣṭi*) the seeds in this life" and (2) by causing *ālayavijñāna* to persist into the next life. He explains the first:

> "Nurturing the seeds in this life" means that insofar as skillful, unskillful, and indeterminate [moments of] manifest awareness arise based on *ālayavijñāna*, their simultaneous arising and ceasing, supported by their own supports, infuses imprints into *ālayavijñāna*.

Every experience we have affects our subliminal cognitive processes. Yogācārins call this "infusing imprints" or "nurturing seeds." Repetition reinforces and refines these experiences, forming ever more clearly defined forms of awareness:

> By that cause and that condition, through being skillful, [unskill-

> ful,] and so on, forms of manifest awareness will reoccur successively more well nurtured, well defined, and quite distinct.

In other words, our present experiences cumulatively help construct and strengthen later ones. For example, many people do not initially like the lush sound of jazz or the taste of cocktails, but they can gradually come to appreciate their inimitable pleasures. This same process occurs even more obviously in child development. The visual cortices of newborn babies are undeveloped, so initially they cannot discern discrete objects. But as a baby interacts with its environment, the neural networks supporting the visual cortex slowly develop, getting stronger and thicker with each repeated experience, enabling the infant to eventually see recognizable objects. This process is summed up by Hebb's rule in neuroscience: neurons that fire together wire together. Asaṅga is depicting something similar here. There is ongoing feedback between our momentary conscious experiences and the persisting yet unconscious processes that are continuously affected by them, and whose imprints or predispositions grow and develop over time, influencing what we later experience. This describes how we acquire new skills or habits, how repetition leads to routinization and habituation, creating and reinforcing physiological and psychological structures—and also how we get caught in compulsive behavior patterns.

The second way in which manifest processes influence *ālayavijñāna* is by perpetuating rebirth. In early Buddhism, rebirth is driven by our afflicted actions, and *vijñāna* is the only process explicitly said to persist across lifetimes. Yogācārins argue, however, that it is not some vague, generic form of *vijñāna* but rather *ālayavijñāna* that continues on in an uninterrupted stream from one lifetime to the next. It is the actions accompanying our manifest forms of awareness that project or propel *ālayavijñāna* into the next life both by strengthening our afflictive predispositions and by creating the karmic potentialities, the seeds, that perpetuate (*pravṛtti*) the wheel of cyclic existence—which, we remember, is the basic theme of this section.

Asaṅga next describes the opposite direction of influence: how our underlying stream of subliminal awareness influences the way we consciously experience the world, shaping our perceptions (*vijñapti*). *Ālayavijñāna* serves as a condition for the manifest forms of awareness to occur in two ways: (1) by providing their support—that is, by pervading or

"appropriating" the entire body, not just the individual faculties—and (2) by "being their seed" (*bījabhāva*).

What does "appropriating the body" mean?

As far as we can tell, cognitive processes do not occur in dead bodies; they must be alive. There must be some degree of sentience for our sense faculties to be receptive to stimuli in the first place. For most Indian Buddhist schools, *vijñāna* plays this role by taking up (*upādāna*) the body uninterruptedly from the moment of rebirth until it leaves the body at the time of death. As we saw in the "Proof Portion," Yogācārins argue that none of the six forms of manifest awareness can do this, since they are dependent on and limited by their respective faculties. It is *ālayavijñāna* that serves as ever-present "simultaneous support" for all our conscious processes by pervading and "appropriating" our entire body, as a kind of underlying, basal sentience.

Next, *ālayavijñāna* "possesses" the seeds (*bīja*) for overt forms of awareness to occur. Whatever forms of "manifest awareness arise . . . all have *ālayavijñāna* as [their] seed." Thus, on the one hand, our conscious experiences infuse the imprints and deposit the seeds "into" *ālayavijñāna*, while on the other hand, *ālayavijñāna* both shapes and provides the seeds for future forms of conscious experience. What Asaṅga has depicted is an ongoing, *reciprocal* and *simultaneous* relationship between these two levels of cognitive processes—their "mutual conditionality"—couched in terms of "seeding." Let us pause to briefly examine how this works, since it is all too easy to reify this fertile metaphor.

The process of seeding

One of the basic problems creating the Abhidharma Problematic was how the latent afflictions and potentialities for karmic fruition, represented by the metaphor of seeds, could persist from moment to moment based on only intermittent and distinct forms of cognitive awareness. There must be some continuous, underlying stream of *citta*, Yogācārins argue, that could absorb and "store" them throughout all states of mind until they come to final fruition—what Vasubandhu, in both his *Treasury of Abhidharma* commentary and his *Twenty Verses*, calls their "specific point of development" (*pariṇāmaviśeṣa*). The question of "mutual seeding," how seeds are passed from one moment to the next, was raised in proof 4 above, where Asaṅga argued that the various forms of conscious awareness are too distinct and

discontinuous for the causal energies denoted by the metaphor of seeds to be properly transmitted through them. This process is mentioned here in the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion" but without clarification. We therefore depart from our usual focus on single Yogācāra texts and draw upon the more systematic reasoning about seeding found in the classic compendium of Yogācāra, Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna* (*Mahāyānasaṃgraha*). We will interweave other passages from its first chapter, which focuses entirely on *ālayavijñāna*, to provide more extended explanations of a few other topics as well.[154]

In chapter 1 of the *Summary of Mahāyāna*, Asaṅga explains how "*ālayavijñāna* and the defiled dharmas are simultaneously and mutually causes of each other" (1.17). As we have seen, this occurs when the imprints and karmic potentials are infused into *ālayavijñāna*, on the one hand, and on the other, when *ālayavijñāna* "produces dharmas" from the imprints and seeds—which is shorthand for the process whereby latent potentials manifest or come to fruition, influencing our every experience. He emphasizes that the cause-and-effect processes these refer to are both simultaneous and complementary.

First, Asaṅga describes the persistence of our dispositions in terms of *vāsanā*: imprints, predispositions, or perfumations.[155] Our intentional actions *perfume* our subconscious processes in much the same way an odor seeps into something, leaving a scent long after its source is gone. For example, moments of sensual desire reinforce their own predispositions, Asaṅga says, by "infusing imprints" into *citta* (that is, *ālayavijñāna*), so that desire more readily reoccurs (1.15). Our underlying streams of *citta* are thereby changed—our dispositions reinforced—*at the same time* we act out those afflictions, which strengthens the conditions for them to arise again.

Accordingly, Asaṅga defines *vāsanā* as:

> that which, based upon arising and ceasing simultaneously with a dharma [such as desire] is the cause of its arising [in the future]. (1.15)

154. We draw on Waldron 2003, 128–69, for these passages. For a comprehensive translation of the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* and its commentaries, see Brunnhölzl 2018.

155. See note 127 on the sense and etymology of *vāsanā*, including "to perfume."

In this way, *ālayavijñāna* becomes the reservoir, as it were, from which future dharmas arise:

> *Ālayavijñāna*, which arises with the special capacity to produce[156] [results], is called "having all the seeds" (*sarvabījaka*). (1.16)

This is also how the process of "producing dharmas" works. Consistent with the strictures of dharmic discourse, seeds have six specific characteristics. They

> are momentary, are simultaneous, continue in an uninterrupted stream, are [karmically] indeterminate, require conditions [to come to fruition], and are completed by their own fruit. (1.22)

These seeds, these energetic potentialities, cannot be infused into the six forms of manifest awareness, since the latter are too disparate and intermittent. They can only be infused into a medium such as *ālayavijñāna*, Asaṅga continues, since it is "stable, [karmically] indeterminate, infusable, and connected with infusing" (1.23).

We need to remember that these are metaphors. "Having all the seeds" is a shorthand way of referring to the karmic energies that have been created by previous actions and that now persist in the stream of *citta* in a potential state, awaiting proper conditions for their fruition—a fairly standard account of karma, albeit couched in the metaphor of seeds.[157]

Put simply, these passages are saying that distinct components of a single yet multilayered stream of *citta* arise and influence each other at the same time. This sets into motion an energetic process that both subtly changes the stream itself and persists from moment to moment in a potential state until it eventually ripens in its final fruition—what Vasubandhu calls its

156. *Utpāda-śakti-viśeṣaka*. This echoes Vasubandhu's definition of seeds in the Abhidharma chapter (AKBh ad 2.36d).

157. See note 24.

"specific point of development" (*pariṇāmaviśeṣa*).[158] But since each of the "waves" of conscious awareness is rapidly changing—buffeted by the gusts of momentary sensations, rising and ceasing with their own distinct conditions—they can neither receive these energies nor transmit their potentials for ripening on to the next moment. Rather, it is the underlying stream that simultaneously receives and preserves these potent energies—the seeds and predispositions—and transmits them to future "waves" of conscious awareness through its more stable currents supporting them from below. Asaṅga is articulating in analytic terms the metaphor of the "violent current with all the seeds" we saw in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

Resolving the Abhidharma Problematic

The foregoing addresses the first part of the Abhidharma Problematic: how karmic potentials persist in the mindstream from moment to moment. The Yogācārins have thereby articulated in dharmic terms how we develop emotional and behavioral habits: triggered by predispositions, these actions leave imprints and seeds in our subliminal processes, strengthening our predispositions through repetition, and thereby more powerfully influencing how we experience the world—how our *vijñapti* appear—in the future. All of this happens simultaneously and reciprocally. In this way, our everyday behaviors are continuously constructed and refined until they become unconscious and automatic. While the "discovery of the unconscious" is hardly news a century after Freud and decades after the "cognitive unconscious,"[159] it represents a significant development in classical Buddhist thought. It provided a robust understanding of how our perceptions are constructed and of the dynamic patterns whereby our deep-seated habits are formed and may, with practice, be gradually eradicated. These are, in other words, tools for understanding the causes and cessation of suffering.

158. As Guenther (1959, 19–20) puts it, our self-centered actions set into motion an "energetic process" (*vipāka*), which "in its potential state energy is 'heaped up' (*upacita*), while in its kinetic state it develops (*vipacyate*) toward a certain effect."

159. Kihlstrom 1987; Hassin et al. 2005.

Our unconscious construction of self-identity

There is, though, still something missing: our actions that produce karmic results are frequently—and not always obviously—self-centered. Traditionally our sense of self-identity ("I am") is said to persist until the last stages of the path. This created the second conundrum of the Abhidharma Problematic: if there were no subliminal layer to our stream of *citta*, if our mind-stream were wholly uniform, then how, in strictly dharmic terms, could self-grasping (*ātmagrāha*)—which is an afflicted state—continuously persist from moment to moment without afflicting each and every action? For if it did, then even generosity would be karmically negative. And if we somehow did have a moment of pure generosity—a karmically skillful state—then why wouldn't that cut off our self-grasping forever, leading to instant liberation, like a candle that is blown out once and for all?[160] Conversely, if self-grasping were *not* uninterruptedly present in every moment, then when it does arise it would be reappearing seemingly out of nowhere, like those trick birthday candles that reignite themselves after you thought you blew them out. As we have seen, standard Abhidharma was unable to systematically integrate the notion of latency into its analyses of mind, resorting to either metaphors or ad hoc factors extraneous to dharmic discourse.[161]

Yogācārins addressed this issue much as they did the persistence of karmic potential: our self-grasping persists as a continuous, distinct, but subliminal cognitive process that is karmically neutral. In the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion"[162] this is simply called *mind* (*manas*), which the *Summary of Mahāyāna* and later Yogācāra texts amended to *afflicted mind* (*kliṣṭamanas*). It, too, occurs simultaneously with all other forms of manifest awareness.

> The [afflicted] mind whose mode is conceiving "I-making" and the conceit "I am" always arises and functions simultaneously with *ālayavijñāna* in states both with and without conscious mental activity. It has the mode of taking *ālayavijñāna* as its object and conceiving it as "I am [this]" and "[this is] I."

160. The original meaning of *nirvāṇa* is "to blow out" the passions. We are paraphrasing here Vasubandhu's argument in his commentary on the MSg 1.7 (Waldron 2003, 149).

161. See Cox 1995.

162. In this section of the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion" we are drawing on Waldron 2003, 182f.

What this means is that we are always identifying, consciously or not, with *ālayavijñāna* and its associations: "These are my character traits, this is my body, my life history, my identity." For most people this implicit sense that "I am this and that" never fully disappears, informing our sense of who and what we are, moment by moment.

To get a better sense of how deeply and unconsciously we identify with our bodies, consider an experiment called "the rubber hand illusion." The subject sits at a table with her left hand hidden behind a screen, while a fake left hand is placed in full view in front of her. The two left hands are simultaneously stroked with feathers. In a few moments most people feel a tingling sensation as they begin to sense that it is the rubber hand in full view, not the hidden hand of flesh and blood, that is *theirs*. This identification is rudely interrupted when the experimenter abruptly hits the rubber hand with a hammer—to which people react with shock and fear.

One explanation for this is that our nervous system constructs an integrated body schema, a map of the entire body, in discrete locations in the brain.[163] This body schema is implicated in an ongoing feedback relationship in which our brains are constantly receiving signals from, and sending signals back out to, all parts of the body, enabling us to function in our worlds appropriately and efficiently—that is, habitually and unconsciously, with a minimum of cognitive effort. We ordinarily cannot observe this deep identification with our bodies until it is brought to our attention by such experiments or by intense meditative states, out of body experiences, and so forth. Mostly, it remains unconscious—but hardly innocuous.

In Yogācāra terms, we are always, albeit unconsciously, constructing not just a sense of *I-ness* ("this is me") but also a deep sense of *mineness*, what the early Buddhists called *I-making* and *mine-making* (*ahaṃkāra*, *mamaṃkāra*). And this identification comes deeply loaded, as the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion" notes:

> [Afflicted] mind is always associated with the four afflictions: the view of self-existence, the conceit "I am," attachment to self, and ignorance.

163. See Damasio 2010, 63–88.

Although, Asaṅga continues, these afflictions occur in each and every moment, they are karmically neutral and therefore, like the processes accompanying *ālayavijñāna*, do not impede the karmic quality of our conscious actions. Nor are they directed toward the same external object. Rather, what we identify with are the processes and feelings constellated in and around *ālayavijñāna*, all of which exhibit considerable consistency over time.

Let's consider what this entails. The text says that afflicted mind "takes *ālayavijñāna* as its object, conceiving it as 'I am this' and 'this is I.'" It is saying that we unconsciously identify with and are profoundly attached to:

- The continuity of our bodily experience (*ālayavijñāna* arises throughout the whole body)
- The entrenched social and cultural categories of conventional names, images, preconceptions, and so on (*ālayavijñāna* arises with inner appropriation)
- The persistence of our cognitive habits—how we tend to perceive, conceive, and react (*ālayavijñāna* arises based on our embodied cognitive complexes [*saṃskāra*] constructed from past actions)
- The ongoing karmic potentialities from our past behavioral patterns (*ālayavijñāna* contains all the seeds)

It is worth spending some time contemplating how these various processes operate in our lives.

Nevertheless, this simple identification with our bodies and so on is still not enough to produce karmic effects. This implicit sense of self, though itself neutral, only becomes karmically potent when it influences how we *actively* respond to the world around us via our conceptual awareness—that is, mental awareness (*manovijñāna*). Asaṅga explains:

> Mental awareness is said to be *based on* [afflicted] mind because as long as [afflicted] mind has not ceased, then [mental awareness] is *not freed from the bondage of perception* (*vijñapti*) concerning appearances (*nimitta*). But if [afflicted mind] has ceased, then it will be freed.

In other words, insofar as our forms of mental awareness are accompanied by this deep-seated, unconscious self-centeredness, we will never be entirely freed from the bonds of seeing and conceiving appearances (*vijñapti*; *nimitta*) in terms of the ingrained categories of self and other, of subjects and objects—that is, the imagined nature—thereby inviting all the erroneous and afflictive actions such self-centeredness entails.

So how does all this work together? Based on the results of previous actions, which "infuse imprints" or "reinforce predispositions" within *ālayavijñāna*, our cognitive processes and conscious experiences are deeply informed by "the predispositions toward runaway association regarding everyday expressions of images, names, and preconceptions." In addition, there are other multiple, yet mostly implicit, conditions necessary for ordinary cognitive processes to occur: the physical structures necessary for the sense faculties to receive and process their sensations; the conceptual structures necessary to recognize and identify discrete "objects"; and the causal potential (*bīja*) for such processes to arise, given appropriate conditions. To this bundle is now added an underlying sense of self-identity, ever ready to instigate yet further afflictive responses.

As a consequence, we are bound to react to perceptions (*vijñapti*) based on our preconceptions and implicit self-centeredness. These reactions, these karmic actions, in turn strengthen those predispositions and plant further seeds, which give rise to yet more results, to which we in turn react with more afflictive actions, and so on. In this way, our compulsive behavioral patterns—saṃsāra, the "going around"—are perpetuated (*pravṛtti*).

Understanding the dynamic, accumulating nature of these patterns is central to Yogācāra's explanatory aim: by analyzing behavior in terms of the interactions among discrete, yet interdependent, layers of conscious and unconscious processes, we can better explain how habits are both made and unmade in *dharmic terms*. Bad habits become "well nurtured, well defined, and distinct," while skillful habits "become very clear," leading to "more desirable and more pleasant results."

The gradual purification and cessation of ālayavijñāna

We can now more fully understand how, in Yogācāra terms, our ill-informed habits come into being and are reinforced, not just at the conscious level but even more intractably at the level of our embedded

emotional and cognitive habits. Similarly, reversing these patterns is a gradual process. This is accomplished through the three trainings: morally disciplined actions (*śīla*) enable us to better practice equanimity and concentration (*samādhi*), whose increased focus leads us to deeper insight (*prajñā*) into reality as it is, making our actions increasingly aligned with our deeper understanding, which enables better concentration, and so on. All this weakens our affective and cognitive bonds and obscurations and increases our wisdom and insight until we are eventually liberated. All this is quite traditional.

The *gradual* nature of this process, however, presents the familiar conundrums of the Abhidharma Problematic: How can both defilements and skillful roots coexist within the same mindstream without interfering with each other? How could gradual purification even be possible if our mindstreams only consist of whatever we are presently conscious of? Responses to these questions—the third leg of the Abhidharma Problematic—also constitute the last "proof" for *ālayavijñāna*. As Asaṅga succinctly puts it: "the gradual cessation of the defilements would be impossible" (MSg 1.61) without a multilayered mindstream capable of "storing" diverse kinds of potentialities, and hence of being gradually transformed.

We will first examine Asaṅga's "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion," which provides the basic outline of this process, and then draw again from his *Summary of Mahāyāna*, which directly addresses the Abhidharma Problematic, connects it with some fundamental Mahāyāna perspectives, and then suggests some of its more interesting implications.

Ālayavijñāna plays much the same role in the "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion" as saṃsāric *vijñāna* did in early Buddhism: it is the stream of awareness that persists uninterruptedly over endless lifetimes, closely connected with karma and *kleśa*—the very processes that constitute and perpetuate our saṃsāric existence and whose cessation is tantamount to liberation. And insofar as *ālayavijñāna* is "accompanied by the appropriations and spiritual corruptions" that characterize saṃsāric life, it is considered the "root" of all the afflicted dharmas and the "cause of perpetuating the afflictions (*kleśa-pravṛtti-hetu*)."[164] It is, in short, the basis of our saṃsāric identity in all its

164. Waldron 2003, 188.

messy, conflictive complexity. Conversely, on the path toward liberation, *ālayavijñāna*—also like *vijñāna* in the early texts—is gradually emptied of all its seeds and eventually brought to an end. This too is consistent with earlier forms of Buddhism but now couched in terms of seeds, predispositions, and unconscious processes.

All this is possible precisely because what is designated as *ālayavijñāna* refers to many heterogenous elements. It is more a set of nonconscious processes and potentialities than a singular entity.[165] As such, it is able to encompass not only the seeds for *defiled* dharmas but also the "seeds of skillful roots" conducive to liberation and penetrating insight—even though these *contradict* (*virodha*) the predominately defiled character of *ālayavijñāna*. Liberation is gradually realized by cultivating these karmically "skillful roots and seeds."[166]

This is, of course, no easy task. Since both *ālayavijñāna* and afflicted mind are subtle, most of us are not able to discern them directly. It is only when a practitioner deeply realizes the four noble truths and reaches the stage of *guaranteed liberation* that they are able to penetrate *ālayavijñāna* and directly realize just how bound they are by the "bonds of characteristics and spiritual corruption." Only then do they fully realize how much their understanding of reality is distorted by their affective and cognitive obscurations—that is, by the afflictions of ignorance, lust, self-grasping, and the false views that prevent us from seeing things as they truly are. Accordingly, they remedy all these by cultivating the wisdom that takes true reality, thusness, as its object—a process that transcends ordinary cognition. The "basis"—that is, *ālayavijñāna*—is eventually revolved (*āśrayaṃ parivartate*), fundamentally transforming their entire being and, in this text at least, eliminating *ālayavijñāna* altogether. When this is fully accomplished, all of one's defilements are abandoned. We will return to this process in more detail in the last chapter.

This *gradual* process of insight and purification, though, would be difficult to explain if the only *real* processes were momentary conscious ones—

165. See note 153.

166. "*Pravṛtti Nivṛtti* Portion": "If these [skillful roots] occur, then other mundane skillful roots will become very clear and, having nurtured those very seeds, will have greater ability to uphold their own seeds and greater strength toward [their future] realization." Waldron 2003, 186.

yet most Buddhist traditions agree that the afflictions *do* persist even while they are being gradually purified.[167] In other words, the process of purification requires that, despite their opposing characteristics, *both* the gradually weakening afflictions *and* their gradually strengthening antidotes be present in our mindstream at the same time. This problem is exacerbated by the great gulf between the mundane nature of our ordinary minds and the supramundane nature of the meditative states that begin to see reality as it is—not to mention the alternation between them that constitutes spiritual practice over time. Moreover, the tradition insists, one's stream of *citta* is *inalterably* affected by these life-altering insights into reality, which guarantees one will eventually be liberated (*samyaktvaniyāmam*)—despite the mundane states that will arise in the meantime.

The problem of the gradual elimination of the latent afflictions is thus, in effect, the mirror image of the problem of their continuity: once the remedies to them have been initiated, how can the seeds for these remedies persist in the mindstream during more afflicted states? This would not be possible, Yogācārins argue, without a multifaceted and karmically neutral medium like *ālayavijñāna*, where the remedies to the afflictions coexist with the predispositions of those afflictions, much like medicine coexists in the same body that harbors the malady it acts upon.

Healing is a useful analogy for this. For remedies to be effective, whether by means of endogenous antibodies or ingested medicines, they need to be present in the body at the same time as the malady. The idea that the mind could "heal itself," however, was often criticized by Indian philosophers, citing the problem of reflexivity—the eye cannot see itself, a knife cannot cut itself, therefore the mind cannot know or heal itself. This assumes, though, that "mind" refers to a singular or unitary thing, which we seldom assume about bodies. We readily accept the idea that the body can "heal itself" because we recognize that "body" is a *name* for a complex set of interacting systems that affect each other in various ways. Similarly, *ālayavijñāna* is a conventional designation (equated with *citta* by Yogācārins) that refers to a complex stream of diverse processes and predispositions, some of which contradict and counteract others.

167. Otherwise, Vasubandhu notes in his commentary on MSg 1.57, the mere generation of the antidote would, in and of itself, be tantamount to attaining nirvāṇa; Waldron 2003, 157.

We might still wonder, though, how *ālayavijñāna*, whose seeds are the very cause of defilement, could ever give rise to its own antidote (*pratipakṣa*)? If we are so deluded that our whole understanding of reality is obscured and defiled by our unconscious ignorance and craving, how could we ever wake up and see things as they are? And if we have never had such an insight before, where would it come from? What would be its causes and conditions?

This line of questioning elicits an overtly Mahāyāna response in Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna*,[168] where he cites an early canonical text:

> The Buddha said, "Depending on the speech of others and on one's own thorough reflection—by these causes, perfect view arises."[169]

Asaṅga goes on to explain that the liberating *citta* of perfect view arises from "the seeds of the impressions of hearing [the teaching] that issue from the perfectly pure dharma realm."[170]

The idea that our minds have originally pure elements mixed with delusion and defilements has deep roots in the Buddhist tradition, but it was not well developed until Mahāyāna came on the scene. A famous Pāli text, for example, states that "This *citta*, O monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements."[171] This is preserved nearly verbatim in Yogācāra sources, which speak of "a *citta* that is pure and luminous in its original nature" but whose defilements are "adventitious"—that is, extraneous, added on.[172] So too, Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna* 1.46 states that the impressions of hearing the dharma coexist within *ālayavijñāna* like milk and water, simultaneously present yet distinct and separable.

168. MSg 1.44–49; discussed in Waldron 2003, 153–57.

169. This closely corresponds to *Aṅguttara-nikāya* 1.17 and is also cited in Yaśomitra's commentary to the *Abhidharmakośa*, ad 2.49.

170. *Suviśuddha dharmadhātu niṣyanda śruta vāsanā bīja.*

171. *Pabhassara-sutta*, AN 1.51; Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999, 36.

172. Jaini 1959, 249; Johansson 1979, 102; *prakṛti prabhāsvara citta, āgantuka.* MVBh. 1.22.c–d. See Keenan 1982 on this question in early Yogācāra. The *Abhidharmakośa* (7.22) also mentions a subtle "seed of liberation" (*mokṣabīja*) in peoples' mindstreams that only a buddha can discern.

Such separation, of course, takes work. With effort (*prāyoga*) as the main factor, "by repeatedly practicing hearing, contemplation, and cultivation," our predispositions toward a supramundane *citta* that directly realizes reality gradually increases, as *ālayavijñāna* decreases:

> Inasmuch as the weak, medium, and strong [predispositions from having heard the Dharma] gradually increase, so much does the resultant consciousness [i.e., *ālayavijñāna*] diminish, and the basis is revolved.
>
> When the basis is transformed in all aspects, the resultant consciousness possessing all the seeds becomes seedless and is also eliminated in all aspects (MSg 1.48).

In sum, Asaṅga argues that not just gradual progress along the path but also complete liberation itself is only possible if we posit a distinct stratum of cognitive processes, a karmically neutral underlying awareness "possessing all the seeds," that is capable of simultaneously supporting both the remedies and the afflictions they counteract. And this, he claims, is what the Buddha referred to in the verse quoted at the start of his *Summary of Mahāyāna*:

> The basic element since beginningless time is the common support of all dharmas.
> As this exists, so do all the destinies and the realization of nirvāṇa (1.1).

Language, Dependent Arising, and Our Common Worlds

Thus far the concept of *ālayavijñāna* has been primarily couched in general Abhidharmic terms, largely addressing issues about individual continuity raised by the doctrine of momentariness. In analyzing the diverse cognitive processes within the individual, however, not only did Yogācārins articulate an explicit theory of cognitive constructivism, but their analyses also began to move beyond the strictly individual. That is, they came to see how the subliminal processes associated with the catego-

ries and classifications of language support and inform not only our individual conscious experiences but also our collective constructions, leaving us enthralled to the products of our own cognitive processes (*vijñapti*) at the social and cultural levels as well. These developments provide an expanded dimension to the core question driving the three-natures theory: Why are we so enthralled to appearances and so ready to impute essences?

Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna* 1.58–61 and its commentaries broach these topics in a short section discussing the unconscious influence of language on our cognitive processes.[173] One of them explains that it is owing to the "special power" (*śaktiviśeṣa*) of the "predispositions or imprints of speech" that conscious awareness arises in regard to expressions of selves, dharmas, and actions. That is, cognitive awareness takes on the form of humans and gods, eyes and visible forms, and comings and goings, respectively,[174] due to the imprints of conventional expressions (*vyavahāra*). In this way, imprints from everyday speech, which divides the world up into discrete objects and categories, subtly condition our conscious experience. The shape of the perceptions we experience, the categories of the things we see and touch—our *vijñapti*—are subtly influenced by the expressions and figures of speech to which we are habituated.[175]

Languages, of course, are not private. They are social and intersubjective, their categories shared among their respective speakers. Languages are also governed by syntax, which both constrains how these worlds can be expressed while enabling unending expressive possibilities. Insofar as we inhabit worlds constructed under the influences of language, these too give rise to endless recursive proliferations, both individual and collective, both conscious and not. How so?

In *Summary of Mahāyāna* 1.59, Asaṅga states that *ālayavijñāna* has both

173. I draw on Waldron 2002 and Waldron 2003 for this and the next section.

174. Vasubandhu's commentary (Waldron 2003, 159) states that the impressions of speech serve as the "manifesting cause" (*abhinirvṛttihetu*) for objects of perception to arise.

175. This is largely shared among contemporary cognitive scientists. "The language user partitions her world into discrete units of particular kinds" (Tomasello 1999, 150); "the continuing use of language conventional in their culture leads children to construe the world in terms of the categories and perspectives and relational analogies embodied in that language" (189).

individual and shared aspects (*sādhāraṇalakṣaṇa*), which the next several verses elaborate:

> Its common [aspect] is the seed of the shared world.[176]
> Its uncommon [aspect] is the seed of the individual sense-spheres (1.60).

This transition from individual to shared forms of unconscious cognitive processes is intriguing, but we must examine it with some care lest we reify it into some kind of "collective mind." Let's briefly review how this developed from earlier Buddhist traditions.

We have already seen how our worlds arise in relation to the structures of our cognitive faculties: we can only see what is visible, hear what is audible, and conceive what is conceivable.[177] Most scholars of early Buddhism agree that this is neither a form of idealism or realism;[178] rather, it is the view of dependent arising. That is, our "worlds" arise when objects impinge on their respective sense faculties and give rise to distinct forms of cognitive awareness. Therefore what counts as an *object of experience* depends upon the structures of the sense organs and faculties.

This initial insight of the Buddha has far-reaching implications. In the early Buddhist view—which is largely consistent with the *causal pattern* of the long-term feedback loops depicted in evolutionary biology—our sense faculties and cognitive schemas have come about from past actions and behavior, whose cumulative results have been gradually built up until they become, as Asaṅga later puts it, "well nurtured, well defined, and quite distinct." These structures enable further karmic activities, which are instigated by our ever-deepening dispositions, and so on. This vicious cycle of action-results-afflictive reaction, depicted in the formula of dependent arising, delineates how our habits of body, speech, and mind come about.

176. The term *bhājanaloka* is often translated as "receptacle world." I prefer "shared world," based on the sense of *bhājana* as "sharing or participating in, entitled or relating or belonging to."

177. Johansson 1979, 28; *Sutta Nipāta* 169, AN 9.38.

178. Johansson 1979, 28 (see above, page 54); Bodhi 2011, 32 (see above, page 74); Ñāṇananda 1971, 84 (see above, page 60).

Insofar as these habits are informed by the similar influences of language, our "worlds" are similarly structured. We see the germ of this in early Buddhist ideas on mental awareness (*manovijñāna*), whose supporting faculty is mind (*mano* or *manas*). Mental awareness arises with two kinds of objects. Its first object is a previous moment of sensory awareness: visual awareness is aware of something blue, while mental awareness is aware *that* it is blue. Mental awareness also arises with reflection and analysis, both considered formations of speech.[179] As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (1976, 5) puts it: "conceptual activity presupposes language, so much so that thought itself may be regarded as a form of sub-vocal speech."[180] In short, the reflexivity of self-awareness—being aware that we are aware—is largely a function of our linguistic capacities and hence, by extension, our sociality.

This "linguistification" of human experience underlies the complex interrelationships among sensory forms of awareness, mental awareness of nonsensory objects such as thoughts or ideas, and the ensnaring web of conceptual proliferation. Our self-awareness, like the linguistic structures that enable it, is open-ended, inviting an endless recursivity, entangling us in webs upon webs of our own devising—what Buddhists called *conceptual proliferation* (*prapañca*).

The most consequential of these recursive, self-referential processes is no doubt our ingrained sense of ourselves as an independent agent or subject of experience—the conceit that "I am" this or that. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (1976, 11) observes that the label "I" is not only an outcome of *prapañca*, but, as the *Suttanipāta* (915–16) notes, it is also the *root* of proliferation, of the recursive cycles of perceptions, proliferation, and further perceptions (MN 18.15).

In short, our sense of self-identity, which is so karmically potent, is not some simple referent *of* language; it is a byproduct of the recursivity entailed *by* language. Our very sense of self is a conceptual proliferation, an endlessly receding cipher arising out of the complex interactions between the

179. *Vacīsaṅkhārā*. See above p. 61, n. 43.

180. This bears comparison with modern accounts: "Systems of thought emerge from this reflexive activity because self-observation employs all of the categorization and analytic skills that are employed in perceiving, understanding, and categorizing the outside world—in effect the subject perceives, understands, and categorizes her own cognition facilitated by the fact that it is expressed externally in language" (Tomasello 1999, 195).

recursivity of linguistically informed reflexive consciousness, the interdependent web of linguistic reference, and the intersubjective nexus of multiple language users. It is a cipher whose sole "reality" consists of its influences upon the hearts and minds, the thoughts and deeds, of symbol-sharing beings such as ourselves.[181] And it is our compulsive attempts to grasp onto this insubstantial will-o'-the-wisp that keeps us running in circles.

How does this lead to our shared worlds? Insofar as our bodies have come about as a result (*vipāka*) of our past karma, then our *similar* human bodies have come about as a result of our similar past actions—that is, whatever karma led us to this similar human birth. And insofar as our human faculties are similar, they give rise to similar—that is, species-specific—worlds. Such is the early Buddhist view.

As before, much of this is transposed in Yogācāra into unconscious terms. Our perceptions of the world are widely shared because the shared medium of language (with its semantic and syntactic categories and recursive reference to virtual "selves") imparts similar influences upon our actions.[182] These similar actions create the *seeds* for us to experience similar worlds—the seeds that comprise the *shared aspect* of *ālayavijñāna*. In other words, insofar as, due to similar influences, we have performed similar actions in the past, these have led to similar results.

Returning to *Summary of Mahāyāna* 1.60, one of the commentaries explains:

> "The common [aspect of *ālayavijñāna*] is the seed of the shared world" means it is the cause (*kāraṇahetu*) of perceptions (*vijñapti*) that appear as the shared world. It is common because these perceptions appear similarly to all who experience them through the force of maturation that is in accordance with their own similar karma.[183]

181. "It is a final irony that it is the virtual, not actual, reference that symbols provide which gives rise to this experience of self. This most undeniably real experience is a virtual reality . . . its virtual nature notwithstanding, it is the symbolic realm of consciousness that we most identify with and from which our sense of agency and self-control originate." Deacon 1997, 452.

182. Think of how fashion works and extrapolate accordingly.

183. Vasubandhu states that both the sentient and insentient worlds result from the accumu-

Again, apart from the notion of *ālayavijñāna*, much of this is standard karma theory. What is innovative here is that Yogācārins recognized that much of this takes place unconsciously. The predispositions of speech (MSg 1.58)—that shared medium of conceiving, expressing, and eliciting similar forms of awareness—unconsciously influence how we experience our worlds. The subliminal processes that underlie all forms of conscious awareness—that is, *ālayavijñāna*—dependently arise based on the "appropriation of the tendency toward runaway associations about everyday expressions of images, names, and preconceptions." And insofar as this highly structured *ālayavijñāna* serves as the "simultaneous support" for all forms of manifest conscious awareness, then these proliferating tendencies indelibly yet unconsciously influence each and every moment of waking consciousness. Conscious awareness for human beings is never simply seeing, tasting, or hearing, and so forth, because it is, at bottom, inevitably configured by linguistic, and thus social, categories—albeit operating mostly outside our immediate awareness.[184]

We now have an answer to that key question, picking up where Nāgārjuna left off, of why we are so predisposed to experience things in terms of the imputations and conceptual discriminations that comprise the imagined nature (*parikalpitasvabhāva*). As Asaṅga notes:

> Mental awareness is conceptual discrimination (*parikalpita*). . . . It arises from its own seeds of the imprints of language, and from the seeds of the imprints of language of all perceptions (*vijñapti*) (MSg 2.16).

lated actions of numberless beings: *sattvabhājanalokasya bahudhā vaicitryamukta; tat kena kṛtam? . . . sattvānāṃ karmajaṃ lokavaicitryam.* *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* ad 4.12.

184. Deacon 1997, 417: "Brain-language co-evolution has significantly restructured cognition from the top-down," such that "its secondary effects have also ramified to influence the whole of human cognition. Human beings approach the world of sensory stimuli and motor demands differently from other species . . . even when our symbolic-linguistic abilities are uninvolved."

Habits, Habits, Habits

We have discussed Indian Buddhist teachings in terms of the construction and perpetuation, as well as the gradual cessation or transformation, of habits. These analyses are couched in terms of multiple, overlapping *feedback loops*, whereby the results of previous actions—our physical and psychological structures—build upon, support, and facilitate actions similar to those that brought them about. The Yogācāra analyses develop these analyses by articulating several distinct loops.

The first feedback loop is the *diachronic* or sequential relationship between our ordinary interactive cognitive processes, the proliferating tendencies regarding "I am," and the afflictive actions they instigate, building up a karmically potent sense of self. This is complemented by the *intrapsychic* and largely *synchronic* feedback loops in the Yogācāra model, which depict a mutually reinforcing relationship between subliminal and supraliminal processes: forms of conscious awareness arise based on *ālayavijñāna* and its linguistic dispositions, together with a subliminal sense of "I am." These help trigger afflictive reactions and karmic actions that in turn "fatten the seeds" and "infuse the imprints" into the same subliminal processes that supported them. In this way, the imprints of conventional expressions and so on both *reflect* the imagined characteristics and preconceptions that pervade our social and cultural lives as well as *facilitate* further perceptions (*vijñapti*) and actions configured in just those terms.

The recursive feedback loop that constitutes our deepest forms of self-grasping not only operates mostly outside our immediate awareness, but, since it is so heavily influenced by linguistic categories we share with others, also gives rise to our shared subliminal worlds. This constitutes a distinctive, unconscious but thoroughly *intersubjective* feedback loop, which—like the other major engines of saṃsāra, karma and *kleśa*—continuously proliferates and perpetuates saṃsāric existence. Unlike them, however, it also bridges the individual and collective experiences of our worlds, connecting our similar karmic activities with the similar worlds—the similar *vijñapti* of selves and things—that these activities bring about.[185] These processes describe, in effect, how we are socialized and acculturated to our shared worlds.

185. "All sentient beings mutually condition each other (*anyonya-adhipatyāt*)," the "*Pratītya*

These shared, consensual worlds, facilitated and sustained through our common cultures and speech forms, are thus brought about by the common causes, the common karma, of multiple beings. "Language," religion scholar William Paden notes, "is a primary medium through which humans inhabit their world" (1992, 7). "Languages are indeed like habitats," he observes, because they give rise to the endlessly proliferating processes of classification and conceptualization through which we habitually, nearly unavoidably, and mostly unknowingly engage, construct, and sustain the evanescent worlds around us—worlds that simultaneously sustain and ensnare us all. And this, I suggest, is the central significance of *ālayavijñāna*: it articulates the unconscious habits of body, speech, and mind to which we are habituated, which give rise, in the long term and in the aggregate, to the habitats we inhabit.

We could say then, as Vasubandhu will soon argue in his *Twenty Verses*, that the dividing line between private and public, individual and shared, is not, as we are wont to imagine, between our skin-encapsulated body and the world, but rather between our material senses and our "minds." As anthropologist Deacon discerns, our self "is not within the head" but "is intersubjective in the most thoroughgoing sense of the term."[186]

If we contemplate the nature of these feedback loops deeply, they elicit that same liberating sense of groundlessness, ungraspability, and inconceivability Nāgārjuna's analyses do. There is no foundation, no final resting point, because the causal patterns that constitute cyclic existence—as well as the recursivity self-identity rests upon—have no natural end.[187] Just as looking for the definition of a word in a dictionary only leads to more words, so the search for some final meaning, or some "real me," is like

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Nivṛtti Portion" observes, "because there are no sentient beings at all who do not experience pleasure, pain, and so on by seeing [hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking about] other sentient beings" (Waldron 2003, 186).

186. "Symbolic reference is at once a function of the whole web of inferential relationships and of the whole network of users extended in space and time . . . a person's symbolic experience of consciousness . . . is not within the head. . . . This self is indeed not bounded within a mind or body . . . [it] is intersubjective in the most thoroughgoing sense of the term" (Deacon 1997, 452).

187. These predispositions (*vāsanā*) are never fully used up (*anupabhukta*). MSg 1.61.2 continues, because "the seeds of the impressions of language give rise to conceptual proliferation since beginningless time," providing forever "new arising of the predispositions of language."

chasing an ever-receding horizon, our last, ultimately groundless loop. Try as we might, there is no "there" there.

The complex cognitive processes centered on *ālayavijñāna* help us flesh out the three natures. Although we consistently impute essences and characteristics onto phenomena where they cannot be found (imagined nature), we can now see how such delusions dependently arise (dependent nature) through the predispositions informing both *ālayavijñāna* and afflicted mind. And once we recognize these phenomena as the constructs they are, we can begin to unravel our bonds to false appearances and come to see things as empty of unchanging essence and full of ineffable thusness (real nature). To thoroughly experience them this way is no easy task, since we are effectively hardwired—as cognitive scientists Bloom, Gazzaniga, and Metzinger have also argued—to impute the twin essences of selves and entities. We can, though, initiate such an understanding through reasoning and analysis, as Vasubandhu demonstrates in his *Twenty Verses*, to which we now turn.

7

Mere Perception in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*

> There is perhaps no collective representation that is not in a sense delusive. . . . The whole social world seems populated with forces that in reality exist only in our minds. . . . There is a sense, of course, in which our representation of the external world is itself nothing but a fabric of hallucinations. The odors, tastes, and colors that take place in bodies are not there, or at least are not there in the way we perceive them.
>
> —Emile Durkheim

> What piece of evidence could ever turn up which would show that the external world is something more than just experience? Whatever piece of evidence turned up would be, precisely, just one further experience.
>
> —Ernest Gellner[188]

WE HAVE JUST examined the constructivist model of mind centered on *ālayavijñāna* based on the two texts of Asaṅga that most systematically present that model. In the next two chapters we turn to works by Vasubandhu, his purported half-brother. The works of these two monk-scholars virtually define classical Indian Yogācāra scholasticism.

Vasubandhu was one of Indian Buddhism's most influential writers. We have already looked at some parts of his *Treasury of Abhidharma* and its autocommentary, still considered classic presentations of Abhidharma.

188. Durkheim 1995, 228. Gellner 1987, 15.

but he also wrote many wide-ranging treatises and commentaries on various aspects of Indian thought.[189] Two of his short texts, the *Thirty Verses* (*Triṃśikā*) and the *Twenty Verses* (*Viṃśatikā*),[190] were influential expositions of the Yogācāra system as a whole and of *mere perception* (*vijñaptimātra*), respectively. A compilation of Indian commentaries on these two, *Demonstration of Mere Perception* (*Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*), was central to the Faxiang school founded by Xuanzang, the great Chinese pilgrim and translator, in the seventh century.[191] This chapter is devoted to Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* and his explanation of them in his own commentary, the *Viṃśatikāvṛtti*.

What Counts as Context?

Surely, we have all wondered at times whether the objects that appear in our world—the trees and mountains, tables and chairs, family and friends—are really there in the way that they seem to be, external to and independent of our perception of them. But how would we know? Do we have the ability to step outside of our senses and thoughts in order to see reality as it is, in and of itself? Or are we effectively bound by our cognitive faculties and cultural categories? And if so, how would realizing *that* affect the way we engage our individual and social worlds? These are some of the issues raised by Vasubandhu in his *Twenty Verses*.

Most traditional and modern scholars interpret Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* as if its primary orientation were ontological, concerning the "existence of external objects." We, however, will take a different tack, interpreting it in light of the Yogācāra ideas we have been considering—that is, analyzing perception and illusion within the general framework of dependent arising and the specific perspective of cognitive constructivism.

As we have seen, humans tend to be naïve realists, to assume the "reality" of the world as we experience it, as if we were passively receiving "data" just

189. See Jonathan Gold's comprehensive presentation and incisive analysis of Vasubandhu's corpus, *Paving the Great Way*.

190. See Kachru 2021 for a contemporary philosophical interpretation of the *Twenty Verses*.

191. Brose 2021.

as they are rather than actively participating in their ongoing construction. But from the point of view of both classical Buddhism and contemporary cognitive science, such simple realism needs to be critically examined.[192] The *Twenty Verses* treats apparent objects not as they are "in themselves" but rather, as Werner Heisenberg, one of the architects of quantum theory, put it, as "part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; nature exposed to our method of questioning" (1971, 81). To realize that our perceptions, our *vijñapti*, are constructed is not only to realize that they are inseparable from our engagement with them. It is also to acknowledge that we have the ability, and therefore the responsibility, to construct worlds that are conducive to the well-being of all beings—reflecting, in Mahāyāna terms, the bodhisattva commitment to alleviate suffering and lead all beings to liberation. This is the rationale for deconstructing our naïve realism, our blinding enchantment with our own creations. Or so Vasubandhu suggests in this short but profound dialogue.

The *Twenty Verses* is usually considered the *locus classicus* of the idealist interpretation of Vasubandhu's Yogācāra. According to that interpretation, Vasubandhu denies the existence of external objects altogether, claiming that they are mere mental projections.[193] It is not hard to see why people come to this conclusion. The first few lines of the *Twenty Verses* make some startling statements. Citing a Mahāyāna sūtra, Vasubandhu declares:

192. See Westerhoff 2020 for a critique of realism from a philosophical perspective, and Waldron (forthcoming) for a review essay exploring parallels with the *Twenty Verses*.

193. For example, as Tola and Dragonetti (2005, 454; emphasis added) define it, idealism "denies the *real existence* of the empirical world and considers it a mere illusion, a false product of mind submerged in error," which they also identify as the dominant tendency of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Gold (2015b), however, suggests we could use the term *idealism* in a broader sense, one that is open to various ontological positions and more consistent with contemporary cognitivism: "To call a view Idealist it is sufficient merely that it holds that everything is *dependent upon* mind—a mind, or many minds. . . . Idealism says that ideas, or minds, are in one way or other behind, or prior to, all other forms of existence." This definition has much to recommend it, since it emphasizes that what *counts* as an object depends on the mind that designates it. However, it is so broad that the Dalai Lama's and Garfield's comments above on pages 143–44 and 137 (Gyatso 2009, 102; Garfield 1995, 251) would also count as idealism. It would also no longer be strongly contrasted with realism. Thus we use the term *idealism* in its more usual metaphysical sense—and critique it accordingly.

> In the Mahāyāna, everything in the three realms is established as nothing but perception (*vijñaptimātra*).[194]

He then states that the term *vijñapti* is synonymous with the other Buddhist terms for mind or consciousness we have already examined: *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*. And "nothing but" (*mātra*: "just," "only," "mere") is used in order to exclude any object or objective referent (*artha*) (ad verse 1). But what does he mean by an object or objective referent?

What Vasubandhu seems to be saying is that the objects in the external world are *nothing but* perceptions, appearances, cognitive phenomena of some kind. But should we take this at face value, as if he were claiming that there *literally* is no world out there and that all the objects we (seem to) experience are nothing but figments of our individual and collective imaginations?

Something like this has been the standard interpretation of this text, and for much of Yogācāra, for many centuries, in India and Tibet. But after spending the last few chapters deciphering Yogācāra texts—examining their concepts enfolded in multiple frames of meaning[195]—we should be wary of taking such passages at face value. How then might we better understand them? An obvious, indeed crucial, approach would be to look at its *context*—more than any other Yogācāra text, selected passages from the *Twenty Verses* have been extracted from their historical and doctrinal context and interpreted in various ways, often quite literally. So we need to take contexts into account. But this immediately raises its own thorny question: Which counts as context?

There are some texts, like the voluminous *Stages of Yogic Practice*, which was compiled over a long period, that contain heterogeneous elements and demonstrate obvious internal development. One of the main tools for understanding these developments is reconstructing its compositional history (Kragh 2013). In the case of the *Stages of Yogic Practice*, this internal evidence is both primary and plentiful. The *Twenty Verses* is not like this.

194. We will be citing two unpublished translations, one by John Dunne and one by Jonathan Gold et al. As with texts in previous chapters, we will be modifying certain terms and phrases for consistency. See Silk 2016 for critical editions of this text in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

195. From early Buddhism to Abhidharma to early Mahāyāna to Yogācāra's three turnings.

It is a short text—just ten pages—composed as a dialogue with a Buddhist "realist" of the Abhidharma persuasion, that relies on concepts and models it does not explain and raises issues whose import is not entirely clear from the text alone. Why *vijñapti*, why seeds? Why question the reality of our "world," comparing it to dreams, hells, and hallucinations? And who is Vasubandhu debating anyway?

To address these questions, we will consider multiple frames of relevance. First, we will consider the larger historical context, since Vasubandhu's text is critiquing multiple strands of Buddhist and Hindu thought. Second, in order to understand technical terms he does not explain, we will consider other works by Vasubandhu as well as other Yogācāra texts. And last, we will consider the *Twenty Verses* as a whole, especially where Vasubandhu *tells us* what the purpose of *vijñaptimātra* is. We cannot hope to understand a sharply focused and technical treatise like the *Twenty Verses* without taking these multiple contexts into account.

This approach differs from the influential "received" tradition of many Indian and Tibetan commentators, who tend to interpret Vasubandhu—indeed Yogācāra as a whole—from perspectives devised several centuries later. To successfully debate other Indian traditions, later Buddhist systematizers, beginning with Dignāga (480–540 CE), sought to provide more broadly acceptable rationales and justifications for their distinctive doctrines. Roughly speaking, this led them to couch their doctrines more in terms of what exists than in the earlier Buddhist terms of how things arise. This is a marked shift in Indian Buddhist thinking, which profoundly influenced how later Buddhist thinkers interpreted their own earlier traditions. Put simply, readers will interpret the *Twenty Verses* quite differently if they think Vasubandhu is primarily answering an ontological question, "What truly exists?" rather than a cognitive one, "How do illusions arise?" Similarly, *mere perception* (*vijñaptimātra*) is understood quite differently if it is taken as an ontological claim rather than as a critical, corrective concept.

Our approach sees Vasubandhu and classical Yogācāra as addressing issues raised within their own historical milieu and couching them in those terms: those of dependent arising, the emptiness of all dharmas, and the orientation and ideas of the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*. We will briefly review these three contexts.

Context 1: Objects in earlier Buddhist perspectives

As we have seen, the status of objects in Buddhist traditions is complex, both historically and philosophically. In the early Buddhist perspective of dependent arising, all phenomena we experience occur with and depend upon various causes and conditions. This is especially so with our awareness of the world around us. What we experience as our world depends upon our faculties and what they are structured to respond to. In this early Buddhist view, what we experience as "objects" are *constructs* dependent on multiple causes and conditions. This was no simple empiricism, where what we perceive is simply what is "out there." That would be an unwarranted, "realist" interpretation superimposed upon the teaching of dependent arising.[196]

The Abhidharma traditions departed from this simple but profound approach in their efforts to systematize the vast and variegated teachings of the Buddha. They analyzed our cognitive processes and the experiences they give rise to into their purportedly irreducible elements, their *dharmas*. To rigorously describe and communicate this required that dharmas have clear and stable definitions. Accordingly, the Abhidharmists defined the essence (*svabhāva*) or distinctive characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) of each dharma. Moreover, in contrast to our conventional understanding of the world, with its apparent objects and entities, they claimed that only dharmas are truly "real" and that only analysis in terms of dharmas accurately describes what truly exists.[197]

One of these Abhidharma realists is the interlocutor in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*. The debate over whether or not dharmas are ultimately real in this sense—and especially whether the specific dharma called *object* (*artha*) has an essence or distinctive characteristic—is arguably the main point of the text (verse 10). The arguments Vasubandhu is making are raised *against* this realist position that an *artha* has/is an essence with an ultimate

196. An interpretation, we might add, that several generations of modern Pāli scholars have refuted, based solely on Pāli sources and *without* reference to Yogācāra doctrines. See Johansson 1979 and Ñāṇananda 1971, pages 54 and 60 above, and Hamilton 2000.

197. This is an oversimplification. Abhidharma schools did disagree on the "reality" of dharmas. Their positions ranged from the "nominalism" of the Sautrāntikas to the ontological "realism" of the Sarvāstivādins. But their "realism" was the main target of Mahāyāna critiques.

characteristic, and his positions are therefore in basic agreement with the early Mahāyāna ideas we examined above.

That is, early Mahāyānists argued that the claim that a dharma has an ultimate nature or characteristic contradicts the view of dependent arising. All dharmas, they argue, are "empty" of such essence. Rather, the existence of dharmas as apparently discrete elements depends upon them being *designated*; that is, it depends upon our own conceptual imputations. Moreover, they continue, even emptiness is empty in that it too is a provisional designation (not a view) devised to remedy our tendencies to impute essence.

Early Yogācārins similarly criticize the idea that cognitive objects (*artha*) have an essential nature, but more on the grounds that such apparent "objects" are the products of complex cognitive processes and are only known through our interaction with them. Hence, what we experience are mere cognitive constructs, mere perceptions (*vijñaptimātra*).

Context 2: Objects in other Yogācāra texts

Our second contextual frame considers how cognitive objects are treated in other Yogācāra texts. One aim of Yogācāra Buddhism is to free us from the bondage and blindness of our unexamined assumptions. One way of doing this is to show how our perceptions (*vijñapti*) are largely constructed by our faculties, informed by our past experiences, colored by our emotional dispositions, and shaped by our cultural and linguistic conditioning.

To this end, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu repeatedly critique our assumption that our perceptions give us unquestionable knowledge that truly corresponds to "real" objects in the world. If the appearances of such objects are mere constructs, inextricable from our cognitive processes in interaction with an environment, then they are empty of any absolute and independent nature. This insight helps us to stop grasping at the "things" that so consistently, so reliably, let us down. Although the *Twenty Verses* does not present this larger context in much detail, we know Vasubandhu knew it well based on his own extensive body of work.[198]

198. His *Thirty Verses* and *Twenty Verses*; his *Treatise Proving Karma* (*Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa*) and *Treatise on the Five Aggregates* (*Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa*); his commentaries on Maitreya's *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature* (*Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*) *Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes* (*Madhyāntavibhāga*), and *Ornament of the*

Yogācārins argue that forms our conscious perceptions take come about due to the underlying cognitive processes that serve as their support and seed, without which our awareness of identifiable objects would not arise in the first place. These forms are thus a function of how the underlying awareness (*ālayavijñāna*) itself arises. On the one hand, *ālayavijñāna* arises based upon our material sense faculties, the inner appropriation of our predispositions, and so on. Correlative with these, *ālayavijñāna* arises as a vague perception (*vijñapti*) of our surrounding world, whose form is both subtle and obscure. Hence our conscious perceptions arise in the forms they do—as selves, objects, and so forth—precisely because they have already been preconfigured (*parikalpita*) based on our faculties and subconscious predispositions. We can now see why Vasubandhu claims that the Buddha taught the concept of *vijñaptimātra* in order to *introduce people to the emptiness of dharmas* (verse 10).

Although much of the foregoing is not explicitly stated in this short, thematically focused text, Vasubandhu draws upon these two contexts for both the practical framework and the technical terminology he uses in the *Twenty Verses*, as will we in our interpretation.

Context 3: An overview of the Twenty Verses

Since the *Twenty Verses* has been the primary reference for idealist interpretations of Yogācāra, any alternative understanding of *vijñaptimātra* must make better sense of the text itself. This is one of our primary aims. Just as important, though, the *Twenty Verses* presents trenchant critiques of materialism and naïve realism that are as relevant today as they were some sixteen centuries ago. The *Twenty Verses* is also an engaging read, depicting the practice of philosophical debate in classical India—first Vasubandhu expresses his own ideas and then presents objections from the perspective of a Buddhist realist of the Abhidharma persuasion, which he in turn critiques. The dialogic character of the text makes for lively academic reading.

Briefly, the argument proceeds as follows: although there appear to be objects (*artha*) in the world independent of ourselves, what we actually per-

Mahāyāna Sūtras (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*); and his commentary on Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna*.

ceive are just perceptions or cognitive constructs, and an understanding of *this* is the entry to understanding that all dharmas are empty and have no unchanging essence.

The Buddhist realist objects: but didn't the Buddha himself teach that cognitive awareness arises from objects impinging on our sense faculties? Aren't these objects "real"?

Echoing the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, Vasubandhu replies that the Buddha analyzed our cognitive processes into objects and their respective faculties with a "hidden intention": to show that we are not a single, unchanging agent but an aggregation of interactive processes—that is, the selflessness of persons. But his ultimate aim, Vasubandhu explains, was to teach the Mahāyāna idea of the selflessness of dharmas. He did this by teaching that even the dharmas involved in our cognitive processes are not singular, unchanging entities with their own inherent characteristics; they are only *vijñapti*, which merely *appear* to be independent objects, faculties, and so forth. This, he claims, leads to the classical Mahāyāna understanding of the selflessness of dharmas.

Moreover, he continues, paralleling the idea of the emptiness of emptiness, the concept of mere perception is itself just another perception; it too lacks its own intrinsic essence. It is neither a foundational reality, mental or otherwise, nor a universal proposition about what truly "exists."

This last point cautions us against reifying critical concepts. The *stated purpose* of teaching *vijñaptimātra* in the *Twenty Verses* is not to provide a new and improved ontology, such as: external objects do not truly exist but the "mind" that cognizes them does. Rather, it is to challenge our assumptions about our perceptions of the world around us, in much the same way that the early Buddhist idea of no-self was meant to challenge our assumptions about our personal identity, and the early Mahāyāna idea of emptiness was meant to challenge our assumptions about the nature of phenomena. Once our assumptions have been shaken to their core and we have learned how to stop imputing essences where they cannot be found, then we no longer need to hold on to the remedies, the concepts, that brought us to that realization. The overall trajectory of this process parallels Nāgārjuna's use of emptiness, but the analyses here, reflecting the orientation of the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, are directed toward the cognitive processes that underlie and drive such reifying tendencies.

We therefore need to examine Vasubandhu's text closely. Otherwise, as with emptiness, *mere perception* could be interpreted nihilistically, as denying "external" objects or worlds altogether, or—at the same time—idealistically, as positing the real existence of "mind" alone. Ever the Mahāyānist, Vasubandhu is articulating a middle way between these extremes.

What Is a *Vijñapti*?

At the very start, Vasubandhu cites a passage from a Mahāyāna sūtra that many would have considered authoritative: "In the Mahāyāna, everything in the three realms is established as nothing but *vijñapti*" (ad verse 1). He then states that the terms *citta*, *manas*, *vijñāna*, and *vijñapti* are synonyms (*paryāyā*)[199] and that "nothing but" (*mātra*) serves to reject the idea of *artha* as some kind of object or external referent.[200] In short, all apparent objects are nothing but perceptions: all *artha* are just *vijñapti*. Let's examine these crucial terms.

In a seminal article, the late Bruce Hall notes that *vijñapti* is a noun made from a causative form of the verb "to know" (*jñā*), meaning "to make known or inform," and is similar in its verbal root and structure to *prajñapti*, "declaration, conventional designation." In a more strictly cognitive sense, Hall argues, *vijñapti* "designates the basic phenomenon of conscious experience, without requiring its separation into object, subject, and act of cognition" (Hall 1986, 8 and 13). It is often translated as "representation," insofar as it seems to represent something other than itself, such as an object or idea.[201]

We saw in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* that *vijñapti* refers to what we experience or perceive *insofar as* it is a perception, using the analogies of a reflected image in a mirror or an image conjured up in meditation. To say that everything we perceive is *just* a perception challenges our deep-seated assumption that there is a clear, one-to-one correspondence between our perceptions and "objects" seemingly external to our awareness. Indeed, it

199. These first three are commonly equated in Buddhist texts though Yogācāra treatises often distinguished them. See chapter 2, page 50.

200. Only the Chinese text explicitly says "external," 外境 (T 1590.31.74b29). Sanskrit and Tibetan merely mention *artha*.

201. See note 140 on page 185 above for a caveat on "representation" here.

challenges the notion that, as deluded beings blinded by our karma and *kleśas*, we can ever truly know such things. As deluded beings blinded by karma and *kleśas*, he argues, we cannot really know such things as independently existing *artha*.

The term *artha* is telling. Vasubandhu is not denying the two other most common terms for cognitive objects, *viṣaya* or *ālambana*; he is rejecting *artha*. *Artha* has many overlapping meanings in Sanskrit. As well as cognitive object, it can also mean aim, purpose, cause, motive, reason, wealth, concern, sense, meaning, and referent. *Siddhārtha*, for example, the name of the historical Buddha, means "one who has accomplished (*siddha*) his aim (*artha*)." *Artha* is thus an *intentional* object in the sense that it is an object *for us*, one that is necessarily part and parcel of our affective and cognitive processes. To say that an *artha* is a *vijñapti* is to treat it as the part of those processes that refer to cognitive objects, not as something in and of itself.

This point is also expressed in the two other technical terms Yogācārins use to analyze our cognitive processes. Apparent objects are "what are grasped or apprehended" (*grāhya*), while the seeming subject is the "grasper" or "apprehender" (*grāhaka*). The very form of these terms both signify their crucial role in our karmic actions and highlight their grammatical *inter*dependence: a grasper grasps the grasped—like Nāgārjuna's point that a painter paints a painting, an actor acts an action, and so on. Similarly, Yogācāra thinkers frame the basic problem of ignorance in terms of the duality of subject and object: we imagine that these inseparable components of experience are fundamentally separate. We are caught, in short, in the Cartesian theater.

So what are *artha*? Verse 1 reads:

> All this is really mere perception (*vijñapti*) since the objects that appear are unreal (*asat artha*)—as unreal as the hairs, moons, and so on that appear to one whose vision is defective.

Vasubandhu calls these apparent objects "unreal" (*asat*). The Sanskrit term for "real," *sat*, did not mean to most classical Indian thinkers what it means to most modern people: something that has a measurable effect. For the Hindu seers in the Upaniṣads, contemporaneous with the Buddha, the only real (*sat*) things are those that are permanent and unchanging; everything

else is unreal (*a-sat*; "*a*" is a negative prefix in Sanskrit, as in English). The Buddha, though, rejected this dichotomy. It was precisely to steer a middle path between the two extremes of permanent, absolute existence (*sat*) and complete nonexistence (*asat*) that the Buddha spoke in terms of dependent arising.[202] Similarly, most Mahāyāna Buddhists deny the "real" and ultimate existence of saṃsāric phenomena, including dharmas and objects, while affirming their relative and conventional reality as dependently arisen phenomena. As we have seen, this is the Mahāyāna version of the two truths.

So when Vasubandhu calls objects or objective referents *not real* (*asat*), what does he mean? Does he mean they are not permanent *artha*s but they may be *im*permanent ones? If so, then this would agree with the standard Mahāyāna position: all phenomena are *not real* in the ultimate sense, since they lack independent existence, but they are "real" in the conventional sense, since they are dependently arisen. As Garfield (1995, 133n24) glosses Nāgārjuna's verses, their "nonexistence is simply their lack of existence as substantial entities." Or is it possible that Vasubandhu is taking a more extreme position—which most Buddhists would reject—that all *artha* are *completely* nonexistent and have no reality whatsoever? This seems unlikely. First, this nihilistic interpretation of the two truths—that because phenomena are not ultimately real they have no reality whatsoever—was routinely rejected by Mahāyānists. But even more importantly, Vasubandhu explicitly denies this interpretation later in the text (verse 10).

As dependently arisen phenomena, then, cognitive objects (*artha*) are just that: impermanent, dependent objects of cognition. We only know them *through* cognitive processes and *as* objects of cognitive processes—as perceptions. To call cognitive objects *mere perceptions* (*vijñaptimātra*) is to emphasize that what we experience is not independent of our engagement with them; or, more precisely, that we only know them *insofar as* they are cognitive objects.

Three criteria for real objects

As a good dramatist, Vasubandhu doesn't let such statements go unchallenged. In verse 2 he lets his realist opponent (a Sautrāntika, a non-

202. *Kaccānagotta Sutta* (SN 12.15); Bodhi 2005, 357. Nāgārjuna (MMK 15.7; Garfield 1995, 224) also cites the *Discourse to Kātyāyana*. Both texts were cited in chapters above.

Mahāyāna Buddhist)[203] give voice to some commonsense objections to the counterintuitive idea that what seem to be actual objects are not truly *real* but are just cognitions, just perceptions. Surely there are things out there that we can all see and feel and touch and interact with. These realist objections are couched negatively: if there were no objects independent of our cognitive engagement with them, then the following four problems would arise:

> If perceptions are not based on objects (*artha*), restriction in space and time does not make sense, nor does [restriction to] a single mindstream, nor does effective action (verse 2).

The objector, the Buddhist realist, is pointing out the problems he thinks would follow if our perceptions do not correspond to, or accurately represent, truly independent objects.

Objections 1 & 2: time and place. Normally, most of us agree that if we see a car racing down the street toward us, our perception occurs only at the time and place when there actually is a car, not just any time or place. If our perceptions were indeed merely a function of our cognitive processes alone and did not require actual objects to impinge upon our cognitive faculties to trigger that perception, then we could see any object at any time or place. But, the realist insists, this is not the case, our perceptions are in fact restricted to where there actually are such objects. That car is a potential danger here and now. Clearly, the realist argues, objects are necessarily external to and independent of our cognitive faculties.

Objection 3: shared cognition. Moreover, the realist continues, if our perceptions were merely a function of our individual consciousness and unconnected to truly existing objects, then how could you explain why the car coming down the street is seen by everyone there? Most objects are seen or heard by many people, which is one of the ways we know what is real—the testimony of our multiple senses align with those of many people. By contrast, the hairs seen by someone whose vision is defective are only seen by that person.

203. This was the school, "those following sūtras," whose positions Vasubandhu presented in his commentary on the root verses of the *Treasury of Abhidharma*.

Objection 4: causal efficacy. A similar problem concerns the causal efficacy of the object. Those hairs seen by someone with visual defects do not have the same characteristics as real hair; we can't comb it or touch it or smell it. Conversely, objects such as food and clothing have actual, experiential effects: they nourish and protect us. But, like objects in a dream, perceptions unconnected with actual external objects have no such effect. We can dream all night about dining and still wake up hungry.

Vasubandhu's counterexamples

Vasubandhu responds by offering counterexamples that show that *not everything* that meets these four criteria *necessarily* is or refers to an object external to or independent of our cognitive engagement with it. If there are commonly agreed upon exceptions to these four criteria, then these criteria do not, in and of themselves, establish the claim that our perceptions *necessarily* correspond or refer to actual objects independent of our knowledge of them. We would therefore need additional criteria to establish their presence. He offers three such exceptions.

Exception to 1 & 2: time and place. For his first counterexample, Vasubandhu cites objects in dreams. Both Vasubandhu and the realist agree that dream images do not have an objective referent outside the body. Nevertheless, Vasubandhu argues, the first two criteria still apply:

> In a dream, even without external objects, such things as particular villages and gardens, or women and men, are seen in some specific place, not everywhere. Moreover, they are seen in just that place at a certain time, not all the time. Hence, restriction in space and time occurs even without external objects (ad verse 3ab).

Exception to 3: shared cognition. In a similar vein, there are apparent objects we all see, visual illusions like rainbows and mirages, that most agree do not have actual, external referents but that are nonetheless similarly experienced by many people. And while we might think of this in modern biological terms—each species has its own species-specific world—Vasubandhu uses examples persuasive to his interlocutor. In traditional Buddhist cosmology, beings can be born in various realms—the human realm, god realm, animal realm, and so forth. Because their karma ripens differently in

each realm, their bodies and minds are structured differently, so the content of their perceptions differs as well. A human being would see a river as water; a god would perceive it as divine nectar; while a hungry ghost, the personification of insatiable thirst or craving, would see it as a river of pus, urine, and excrement—unable to quench its thirst. Therefore, Vasubandhu argues:

> It is also proven that *vijñapti* are not restricted to a single mindstream, as is the case with hungry ghosts (verse 3b–c).
>
> All hungry ghosts are in the same situation induced by the ripening of their karma; they thus all see rivers filled with pus; it is not that only one sees it. . . . Thus it is proven that *vijñapti* are not restricted to a single mindstream, even though there is no objective referent (*artha*) (ad verse 3d).

Similarly, beings who are born in hell realms due to the ripening of their similar bad karma also have similarly hellish experiences there, one of which is being tortured by apparent hell guardians. Vasubandhu argues, however, that such hell guardians do not have the negative karma to be in hell and therefore are merely a function of the collective karma of the hell beings themselves. Therefore

> Even though the hell guardians do not exist, the hell beings experience these things due to the influence of the *same ripening of their karma*[204] (ad verse 4d).

We saw a similar point in the previous chapter. The commentary on Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna* 1.60 explains that people whose *ālaya-vijñāna* has similar seeds (*bīja*) experience a shared world (*bhājanaloka*): "these perceptions appear similarly to all who experience them through the force of maturation (*vipāka*) that is in accordance with their own similar karma."

We could put this in modern terms. Our similar cognitive domains, our species-specific worlds, are similar precisely because we have similar faculties

204. *Samāna svakarma vipāka adhipatyāt.*

brought about by similar causes. However, these worlds are not the same for all species due to their radically differing faculties. From what we can tell, the stock market has no direct effect on single-celled bacteria. Nor can bacteria contemplate the ramifications of iPhones, take bets on the World Cup, or appreciate Lady Gaga's latest release—such cultural phenomena are not relevant categories for them. In short, we do not have direct knowledge of complex objects as they exist in and of themselves, independent of our own lived worlds; rather, such objects are "realities" insofar as they are defined by and meaningful to us human beings at this stage of our evolutionary development. Who knows what Neanderthals would make of the U.S. Congress?

Therefore the fact that multiple beings experience similar cognitive objects cannot in itself be a universal criterion for the ultimate *reality* of objects independent of our cognitive engagement with them. Most perspectives based on biology and cognitive science would agree with Vasubandhu's point that our worlds, our cognitive domains, are effectively defined by our faculties and give us no guarantee of their complete objectivity.[205]

Exception to 4: causal efficacy. Moreover, Vasubandhu contends, sometimes we see and experience tangible effects in circumstances where even realists would admit that there is no corresponding "object." As a case in point, Vasubandhu cites the example of a wet dream. His point is that after a sexual discharge evoked by dreaming about an erotic date, one might wake up just as hungry but no longer just as lustful. So here is one commonly accepted example of causal efficacy without an independently existing object. Therefore, causal efficacy by itself does not establish the presence of objects independent of our cognitive engagement with them.

Vasubandhu states that these four criteria "are all met in the case of hell" (ad verse 4b): multiple hell beings experience similar hell realms then and there, along with the hell guardians who torture them—even though they have no truly independent existence. These four criteria are therefore insufficient for establishing the true reality of objects apart from our cognitive processes. There are simply too many anomalies and exceptions; there must be a better explanation.[206]

205. Bloom 2005, 222: "The driving force behind natural selection is survival and reproduction, not truth." See also Hoffman 2019.

206. See Blackmore 2005 for a short catalog of such perceptual anomalies.

Where does karma work: mind or matter?

But, our Buddhist realist retorts, causal efficacy—that is, karma—still has to work *somewhere*. The perceptions that hell beings experience due to their karma—the colors, shapes, and sizes of things in hell, and those fearsome hell guardians—must depend on actual material conditions within the hell realms themselves. In other words, there must be some objective material basis for their perceptions of the guardians, just as there must be an objective material basis for our perceptions of the car racing down the street. However constructed our individual and even collective perceptions may be, the realist opponent implies, they cannot be total fabrications: we all stop at the same red light and start together when it turns green—because there *actually* is a light there. The realist's argument rests on a familiar materialist view that holds that atoms (*paramāṇu*) are the fundamental physical reality. (We will return to Vasubandhu's discussion of Indian atomic theories below.)

Vasubandhu, though, does not accept the view that what karma brings about is the *material* basis of the hell realm. Instead, he turns the tables on his interlocutor and accuses him of illogically separating the place where the imprints or impressions are infused by karmic actions—the mindstream—from the place where their results supposedly occur, the material world.

> You suppose that the imprint left by karma is one place and the fruition of that karma occurs in another; you do not assert that the effect occurs precisely where the imprint occurs. What is the reason for this? (verse 7)

On the one hand, this is a discussion of karma. Where does the *potential* for the result of karmic actions arise, persist, and finally come to fruition? Traditionally, as Vasubandhu affirms,

> The imprint of that karma is located in the mindstream of those hell beings; it is not somewhere else . . . [its fruition] is a certain kind of transformation of consciousness (ad verse 7).

On the other hand, in traditional Buddhist cosmology, beings are said to be born into various realms depending on their karma, where they are

endowed with distinctive physiological and psychological characteristics. So when Vasubandhu questions the material bases of our individual and collective conscious experiences, he is also questioning the status of these realms independent of our mindstreams and cognitive processes. This is a serious challenge to a realist understanding of traditional Buddhist cosmology.

The intent of the Buddha's apparent realism

The Buddhist realist responds to Vasubandhu's criticism that he, the realist, is separating *karmic* processes from purely *material* processes by calling upon the authority of the Buddha:

> The reason is scriptural. If there were just consciousness with the appearance of matter, and no material objects, then the Buddha would not have affirmed the existence of the visual and other sensory domains (ad verse 7).

The sensory domains, we recall, refer to the six sense faculties and their respective cognitive objects, which co-arise with six forms of cognitive awareness in the process called *contact*.

Vasubandhu does need to respond to this, since the Buddha did repeatedly refer to the sense domains. He thus borrows a page from the playbook of the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*:

> The Blessed One stated with a certain intention the existence of the sensory domains, such as material form, for the sake of those people who needed to be instructed by that kind of idea (verse 8).

So even though the Buddha did refer to the sense domains, which might suggest they are real objects, his intention was directed toward disciples at a certain stage in their understanding. That is, the reason the Buddha taught that cognitive awareness arises with the conjunction of a sense object and sense faculty—his hidden intention—was to demonstrate that,

> neither a being nor an essential self exists here; instead, there are *dharmas* along with their causes . . . (ad verse 8).

> It is in this way that they come to understand the selflessness of persons (verse 10a).

This is the type of selflessness emphasized in non-Mahāyāna Buddhism.

We might rephrase the discussion this way: are the conditions for the arising of cognitive awareness already there, in themselves, prior to and independent of the very cognitive processes by which they are known? The Buddhist realist is assuming what many consider the commonsensical answer: yes, of course they are already there, and when these preexisting material forms impinge upon our preexisting visual faculty, then and only then does visual awareness arise.[207] But we have to ask: how would we *know* about something prior to and *apart* from our knowing of it?

Moreover, as we saw, early Buddhist texts state that our knowable objects are correlative with our means of knowledge, our faculties, and so on, and they are just *one aspect* of an interdependent and multifaceted cognitive event called *contact*.[208] Therefore, Vasubandhu is suggesting, it is not likely the Buddha meant that they truly exist independently of each other, for that would contradict his own analyses in the formulations of dependent arising and the "arising of the world." Hence there is something suspect about the realist position from the beginning.

What then, in Vasubandhu's eyes, was the Buddha actually intending? So far, most of Vasubandhu's arguments have been couched in standard Buddhist terms. Now, however, he brings in some of the Yogācāra doctrines we have seen in earlier chapters—specifically, the relation between seeds and

207. We should distinguish this view, found in some Abhidharma schools, from the more experiential view based on the earlier Pāli sources. Material form (*rūpa*) there is not simply dead matter. Rather, we *experience* materiality as, or by means of, resistance (*paṭigha*) to the sense faculties. See, e.g., Hamilton 2000, 72.

208. What *contact* means, though, was also debated by the different Abhidharma schools. As Gold (2015a, 114) points out, citing AKBh ad 3.30b: "A Vaibhāṣika [Sarvāstivāda] position is that the coming together of the perceptual organ, the object, and the consciousness produces the contact, which, in turn, brings about feeling, and so on. In response, Vasubandhu cites an alternate scriptural source, which validates his position that the contact described in the Twelve Links just is the coming together of the perceptual organ, the object, and the consciousness (or, alternatively, simply the organ and the object). There is, he says, no separate entity to label 'contact' over and above the activity of these dharmas."

appearances—which, in effect, transpose earlier Buddhist analyses into the newer, Yogācāra terms:

> A perception (*vijñapti*) arises with the appearance of some dharma from its seed. The Sage spoke of those two—the seed from which the perception arises and what it appears as—as the two kinds of sense domain for that perception [i.e., the internal faculty and the external form, respectively] (verse 9).[209]

In other words, while it may *seem* that a truly existing visible form has impinged upon a truly existing sense faculty—the external and internal sense domains, respectively—it only appears that way. The apparent object arises in such a way that it appears as if it exists independently of our cognitive processes.

The question this raises is: why do our perceptions appear this way? Why does it still seem as if both we and the objects we observe are separate, independent entities, when careful analysis reveals their deep interdependence? In other words, why the Cartesian Theater?

We have seen answers to this in terms of the cognitive constructivism of the "Ālaya Treatise." Perceptions dependently arise based on the *correlation* between inner and outer conditions: our faculties, predispositions, and seeds from previous actions, on the one hand, and the vague external world with its variegated sense objects on the other. Vasubandhu now calls upon these cognitive models and technical terms, which he has used in other texts:

> A perception (*vijñapti*) arises from its seed when it has reached a specific point of development; that perception arises with the appearance of visible form, for example . . . (ad verse 9).

What do these terms mean: "seed" and "specific point of development"? Since Vasubandhu does not explain them in this short text, the most sensible way to interpret them is to see how he uses them elsewhere. In his *Treasury*

209. The Chinese text reads slightly differently: 識從自種生　似境相而轉; "Consciousness (*vijñapti*) is born from its own seeds, and transforms to resemble characteristics of objects of perception" (Cook 2006, 396).

of Abhidharma, for example, Vasubandhu discusses the process of karmic fruition in similar terms: a *seed* refers to the capacity for the results of previous actions to come to fruition, in which the mindstream is transformed in a specific way (*pariṇāmaviśeṣa*) (AKBh ad 2.36d). That is, a seed is a *metaphor* for the larger karmic process couched in terms of cause and effect; as with standard karma theory, it is dependent on a multitude of conditions.[210] At this level, a cognitive appearance is always the result (*vipāka*) of an integrated cognitive process. On a larger scale, we wouldn't experience sights, sounds, and tastes the way we do if we didn't have the karma to be born into a specific kind of body, whose cognitive objects are correlative with specific kinds of faculties (which are also the results of past actions). All these conditions contribute to the specific maturation of karmic "seeds"—which, as a metaphor, has only *nominal* existence (*prajñaptisat*) for Vasubandhu.[211]

This is the same reasoning he used in the example of hell beings above, one explicated at greater length in the constructivist models we saw in other Yogācāra texts. That is, the form that our perceptions take, their appearances, are influenced by a multitude of factors, both individual and collective. These appearances are more fully accounted for by focusing on these influences,[212] couched in terms of the dependent arising of our world, than by imagining we have some direct and veridical perception of things just as they are. That would be a view of naïve realism, which the three-nature theory calls the *imagined nature* and that most Mahāyānists routinely reject.

Vasubandhu explains that "This is the [Buddha's] hidden intention of the statement that the sense domains exist." By recognizing that we are not independently existing selves but rather a collection of interactive processes, those "who need to be instructed by that kind of idea" come to the realization of the selflessness of selves. This is a crucial, but still initial, step.

Then, lest we imagine that this implies that any of the components of these interactive processes are truly existing phenomena, as Abhidharmists

210. Commenting on MSg 1.22, Vasubandhu says that a seed only comes into fruition under the right conditions: "These seeds require their own conditions to produce their fruit. Anything does not give rise to anything, but when, in their given time and place, the seeds encounter their own conditions, in these times and places their fruit is born" (Waldron 2003, 137).

211. See note 70 on page 99 above.

212. Vasubandhu makes this point in the next chapter on the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*.

claim, Vasubandhu now clarifies that these apparent dharmas, these *artha*, are also just perceptions that merely appear to be independently existing subjects and objects. And *this*, he argues, is the introduction to the selflessness of dharmas, the classic Mahāyāna theme at the heart of this treatise.

Vijñaptimātra as Introduction to the Selflessness of Dharmas

> Experiencing some elements of our tunnel as mere images or thoughts about the world, we became aware [that] . . . reality is only a specific type of appearance . . . [and] that we are representational systems.
> —Thomas Metzinger (2009, 61)

Vasubandhu's response, then, is that even though the Buddha did refer to objects and faculties, this does not imply they are ultimately *real* in the Abhidharmic sense. As dependently arisen phenomena, these dharmas are also empty of an unchanging essence, hence not ultimately real. But, Vasubandhu quickly warns, this does not mean they are ultimately *non*existent. We have seen this dialectic in both the *Diamond Sūtra* and *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*. Statements made from a conventional point of view may *seem* to refer to real entities (such as the sense faculties and objects), but upon analysis those statements turn out to be skillful means designed to help specific individuals see the selflessness of persons. Similarly, statements made in an ultimate sense—that all dharmas are empty—may *seem* to be saying that all dharmas are ultimately nonexistent, but what they turn out to be denying is their *ultimate*, not conventional, existence.

Here, too, Vasubandhu first rejects the extreme of eternalism, of positing unchanging entities such as selves or things, and then proceeds to avoid the extreme of nihilism, the view that because there are no ultimate essences, nothing is real even conventionally. Hence the *purpose* of introducing the idea of *vijñaptimātra*, Vasubandhu declares, is to "bring people to understand the selflessness of dharmas" (verse 10c). It is

> through the determination that all dharmas are just perceptions [that] one comes to understand that all dharmas are without

> essence. One does not come to this understanding by completely denying their existence (ad verse 10d).

We ought to take these statements seriously.

Vasubandhu is stating that the purpose of teaching *vijñaptimātra* is to introduce (*praveśa*) people to the selflessness of dharmas (*dharmanairātmya*). He then explains what is and is not being refuted—he is refuting essences, not the conventional existence of dharmas *in toto*. Let's look at this section carefully.

Circumscribing the object of negation

Just because the faculties and their objects are taught by the Buddha, Vasubandhu explains, this does not mean that they have their own independently existing natures (*lakṣaṇa*). It is true, he acknowledges, that "childish people" imagine that dharmas have essential natures. But these are just perceptions. Even though

> that perception arises with the appearance of visible form and so on, there is *no dharma whatsoever that actually has the characteristic* of visible form and so on (ad verse 10bc; emphasis added).

This is straightforward Mahāyāna. Vasubandhu is denying that dharmas—visible forms and so forth—have an essential nature or characteristic. So, despite appearances, and despite what we conceptually construct through our false imagination, there are no dharmas with the inherent quality of being an independent subject or object—or anything else for that matter.

This statement is immediately interpreted nihilistically by Vasubandhu's realist opponent:

> If dharmas do not exist in any way at all, then this mere perception also does not exist. That being the case, how can you posit perception? (ad verse 10bc)

This echoes the nihilistic misunderstanding of emptiness: if one denies that dharmas have an essential nature and are thus empty of essence, then this necessarily means, the realist argues, that dharmas do not exist in any way

whatsoever. If that were the case, the realist argues, then the statement "they are mere perceptions" would not be referring to anything and would therefore be meaningless.

Vasubandhu responds that this is a gross misunderstanding: to deny a dharma's *essential* existence by no means entails its complete *nonexistence*:

> It is not the case that one begins to understand the essencelessness of dharmas by thinking "dharmas do not exist in any way at all." Rather:
>
> > Dharmas are without essence in terms of their conceptually constructed nature (*kalpitātmanā*). (verse 10d)
>
> Childish people conceptually construct a nature for dharmas, such as the nature of being an object or subject [grasped and grasper]. Those dharmas are without essence with regard to that conceptually constructed essence. They are not essenceless in terms of the ineffable essence that is the object of the buddhas (ad verse 10d).

Again, Vasubandhu is not arguing that there are no objects, no dharmas, whatsoever. He is arguing that those objects do not have essences as people conceptually imagine them to have. But, he continues, they do indeed have an ineffable nature (*anabhilāpyena ātmanā*), which is the object of awakened beings, such as buddhas, who see them as they truly are. So to say that an *artha* is just a *vijñapti* is not to argue that what appear as objects are completely nonexistent; it is to argue that they have no ultimate essence, that their "nature" is conceptually constructed. Such an "object" is just an appearance that occurs in relation to our constructive cognitive processes, and realizing *this* "brings people to understand the selflessness of dharmas" (verse 10c). In classic Mahāyāna, seeing the selflessness of dharmas, their emptiness, is liberating insight.

Vijñapti are also just vijñapti

We now reach the last stage of the dialectic interplay: the assertion that a *vijñapti* is itself neither an entity nor an essence—for if it were, then it would be just another conceptual construction (*parikalpita*). Rather, Vasu-

bandhu argues, the very concept of *vijñapti* is itself just a *vijñapti* about *vijñaptis*. That is, while we may have perceptions about perceptions, they are still just perceptions, which only arise within the complex causal nexus of our cognitive processes; none of them refer to independently existing objects (*artha*).[213] Thus, Vasubandhu argues:

> In this way, one realizes that even a mere *vijñapti* is essenceless in terms of the essence that is conceptually constructed by other *vijñapti* . . . If this were not the case, one perception (*vijñapti*) would be the object (*artha*) of another perception; that being the case, one could not prove that everything is just a perception because [in this case] a perception would have an object (ad verse 10d).

Mere perception is itself without essence. That is, just as emptiness is also empty, lest it be the sole exception to the idea that *all* dharmas are empty, so too to say something is "a mere perception" is itself also just another perception, just another *vijñapti*, lest it be the sole exception to the idea that all perceptions are mere perceptions. The notion of "mere perception," therefore, is not a "real" dharma with an essence but a critical concept used to clarify the lack of essence, the dependent arising, the appearance, of all dharmas.

We have seen this line of reasoning before. It echoes Nāgārjuna, who denies that emptiness is a "view," a new ontological position to replace other ontological positions, but is instead a tool, a skillful means for remedying our tendency to impute essences. As the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* reports, however, the view that all phenomena are empty was (and still is) misinterpreted as implying that phenomena, dharmas, are completely nonexistent. Although the concept of emptiness was explicitly equated with dependent arising, it was nevertheless accused of the extreme of nihilism. To this day, Mādhyamika teachers have to respond to such charges from other Buddhists and from Hindu and Western philosophers.

213. Thus it also follows, as the commentary on the *Twenty Verses* by Vinītadeva states: "Mind and mental events are devoid of an essence, which is to have the nature of being an object or subject" (Dunne, citing D 4065, 184b2).

We see a similar pattern with the concept of mere perception. Vasubandhu and the Yogācārins have reformulated the logic of emptiness in *cognitive* terms: what we experience are not independently existing subjects or objects; rather, all apparently independent dharmas are mere perceptions. In effect, the Yogācārins take the classic refrain of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras—"visible form is empty, objects are empty, mind and mental consciousness are empty"—and reformulate it: "visible forms are just perceptions, objects are just perceptions, mind and mental consciousness are just perceptions." Even the notion "mere perception" is also just another perception, devised to remedy our tendencies to impute essences to the products of our cognitive processes.

However, the critical idea that *what we experience are just perceptions* was also (and still is) misinterpreted as meaning that all "external" dharmas are completely nonexistent. That is, although Vasubandhu *explicitly* states (verse 10) that the concept of mere perception is an introduction to the Mahāyāna idea that all dharmas have no self-nature (*dharmanairātmya*) and is *not* a refutation of their existence altogether, nevertheless, the early Yogācārins were, and still are, accused of denying the existence of objects altogether.

Ironically, they were, and still are, also accused of the extreme of eternalism: of asserting that mind and mind alone is truly existent, as if the denial of the inherent nature (*svabhāva*) of dharmas necessarily entails the affirmation of the substantial existence of the mind that cognizes them. This accusation came despite the fact that multiple Yogācāra texts repeatedly assert that *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna* are conventional designations and as empty as all other dharmas.[214]

214. Garfield (1995, 133) has expressed remarkably similar points about emptiness in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, which could be applied to Yogācāra, *mutandis mutatis*: "If we simply read this chapter in isolation, that [nihilistic interpretation of emptiness] might indeed seem warranted, it would be hard to distinguish emptiness [or: mere perception] from complete nonexistence. . . . But such a reading would be problematic. . . . It would contradict the doctrine of dependent origination and change that is the very basis of any Buddhist philosophical system, which Nāgārjuna [or: Vasubandhu] has already endorsed in the opening chapter. How, then, are we to read this discussion more positively? Answering this question is hermeneutically critical not only for an understanding of this chapter, but for a reading of the entire text, which if not read with care, can appear unrelentingly nihilistic [or: idealistic]. . . . The conclusion that motion is empty [or: *artha* are *vijñapti*] is simply the

Vijñaptimātra in daily life

Lest we get lost in the clouds of meta-critical abstraction, let's consider how mere perception might apply to our own lives. The kind of world we experience—the way it appears—is a function of our sense faculties and our individual differences based on past karma and experience. Since our awareness of the world is correlative with these, we have no certainty that any of our cognitive objects are truly what they appear to be—these "objects" are still just appearances that occur. Short of buddhahood, we cannot step outside our faculties, dispositions, and proclivities to escape our constructive processes. Nor can we normally *think* our way outside our thoughts, since these too are preconfigured by our faculties and dispositions. Such thoughts would be just more thoughts, more *vijñapti*.

However, while thinking the "right" thoughts might not directly free us, we can direct our thoughts toward the constructed nature of our thoughts. Admittedly, it may be difficult to realize that the cup of coffee I am drinking or the pages I am turning are not what I imagine they are. If I go away for an hour, they still appear right where I left them. We can though more readily understand that sounds and smells are impermanent, for these are more obviously fleeting. And we can easily understand that mental objects have no permanent essence, not just because they come and go so quickly but also because we can watch ourselves creating them. Like the conjured meditation images (*vijñapti*) in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, we can picture a red rose or a unicorn and then dissolve it at will. Such exercises give us an entry into the constructed nature of the images, the *vijñapti*, of our other senses.

Consider Vasubandhu's examples of images in dreams, or the radically different cognitive domains that bats or gnats live in, not to mention the collective worlds of the hell beings and hungry ghosts. Consider also the results of brain lesions, due to which people may no longer see color or one side or the other of their visual field, or they may lose the ability to identify with certain parts of their own bodies. We usually take our faculties and their products for granted until the conditions that typically enable them are impaired—or until we seriously contemplate all these anomalies (Blackmore 2005). Perhaps you have friends who are color-blind, or others who

conclusion that it is conventional and dependent. . . . Their nonexistence is simply their lack of existence as substantial entities."

can hear and taste color (a syndrome known as synesthesia). Discussing these differences is harder than one might think—what common frame of reference could you use, and how exactly would you know whether it is common?

Considering such mundane examples makes it easier to recognize that all our perceptions are mediated through our faculties, that these constructed perceptions are necessarily preconfigured by the very conditions that enable cognition in the first place. As modern cognitive scientists would put it: they are not bugs, they are features. And this line of thinking, from the first line of the *Twenty Verses* to here, ineluctably leads us to better understand the emptiness of all dharmas, empty of intrinsic subject and object, grasper and grasped.

Why Matter Alone Cannot Account for Perceptual Experience

Still, whether out of habit, fear, or unexamined assumptions, most of us cling to notions of materiality, hoping for something solid to hold onto. In Vasubandhu's time too, many thinkers argued that perception was directly connected to matter, especially to atoms (*paramāṇu*)—the topic Vasubandhu takes up in the next section of his *Twenty Verses* (verses 11–15). His brilliant analyses resemble those made by contemporary cognitive scientists: analysis of the purely "objective" components of perception—their purely material properties—cannot *by itself* explain our experience of singular objects. There must be other cognitive processes that bind the disparate sensory input our faculties receive into the discrete objects we consciously perceive.

This section begins with his opponent's inquiry:

> But how is one to know that the Blessed One said that the sense domains, such as material form, exist with the above-mentioned hidden intention? In other words, how do we know that he meant that those things that are taken individually as the object of the perception of material form (*rūpa*) and so on do not exist? (ad verse 11)

Vasubandhu responds by examining Indian theories of perception based on atoms.[215] As with their Greek counterparts, classical Indian scientists defined atoms as the most fundamental unit of matter, irreducible to smaller parts—by definition, partless. The problem is that this is an abstract concept: even if we can *con*ceive of the smallest possible thing, we cannot *per*ceive it. Nevertheless, Indian realists, including Vasubandhu's Buddhist interlocutor, considered atoms to be ultimately real and as such to constitute the real material basis for our objects of perception—and therefore grounds for rejecting Vasubandhu's position of mere perception.

In response, Vasubandhu shows why these realist theories cannot, by themselves, explain our perceptual processes. In defense of *vijñaptimātra*, Vasubandhu critiques three theories of perception held by different schools.

> We know that this is the [Buddha's] intention since: the object is not unitary, nor is it an atomic plurality, nor is it conjoined atoms, because atoms [themselves] are not established. (verse 11)

In short, we perceive neither a singular, unitary entity, nor a mere assemblage of atoms, nor a mass of atoms fused together in some fashion to constitute an object.

Several questions are being raised here: If things are composed only of multiple atoms, then why do we see them as discrete, singular objects? And as atoms are too small to be perceived, then what is it that we *do* perceive? Is it lots of atoms jumbled together in the same general proximity or perhaps fused together in some coherent fashion? But how could a mere collection or even a coherent compound of infinitesimal, partless atoms, in and of themselves, lead to the perception of discrete, singular objects of perception? Vasubandhu presents each of these theories, critiques it on its own terms, and then rejects it.

1) *Singular entity*. Vasubandhu's first target is the Hindu school called Vaiśeṣika, which held that what we see as the object of perception is its own whole (*avayavin*)—an actual, existent entity. For example, the tree as such is its own entity, apart from its parts. Vasubandhu rejects this out of hand, since

215. This was the view of many Indian schools, including the Buddhist Sarvāstivādins. For a broad overview of Indian atomic theory, see Chatterjee 2021.

"one does not apprehend anywhere a material form that is the whole separate from its parts" (ad verse 11). This is Buddhism 101: a chariot is a composite, composed of parts, and has no ultimately real existence apart from these parts, as is true for all apparently singular entities, including persons.

2) *Mere plurality*. Vasubandhu next turns to the views of a non-Mahāyāna Buddhist school, probably Sautrāntika, which holds that while the apparent objects are not ultimately real, they are comprised of multiple individual atoms that are. Vasubandhu objects that the object we see cannot simply be a collection of atoms since we cannot see any of those atoms individually. They must be conjoined in a way that allows us to see them as a whole, singular, and substantive entity. But in what way?

3) *Fused together*. If the only real material things are infinitesimal, partless atoms, how are they fused together such that we perceive them as gross entities occupying space? This is similar to the *binding problem* in modern cognitive science: since the light waves that impinge on the 127 million rods and cones in our retinas are multiple and disparate, how is it that we experience things as discrete, coherent objects and not just an incoherent jumble? The answer in cognitive science, as in Yogācāra, is that they are put together, constructed, through complex cognitive processes that constantly *fill in the gaps* in our visual information (Blackmore 2005, 55–58). These are constructive cognitive processes such as described in the *ālayavijñāna* model. Without such constructivist models, materialists cannot explain how there can be direct perception based on atoms alone.

Some of Vasubandhu's arguments here are ingenious. If it is the simple conjunction of atoms that comprise our perceptual objects, then they must take up space—that is, they must have extension. If so, then they must be joined to each other at specific places—at their top or bottom, their left or right side, and so forth. But if that were the case, then they would not be partless and hence not irreducible, because "if something has different directional parts, then it does not make sense for it to be a single thing" (verse 14ab). This follows from the definition of an atom as an *irreducible* unit of matter—a conceptual not a perceptual definition, we might add. On the other hand, if such atoms were truly irreducible, they would have no extension whatsoever, and no matter how many extension-less atoms were joined together, "the composite mass would only be the size of a single atom" (verse 12cd). Therefore, what the realists posit as the most fundamen-

tally real substance—irreducible atoms—cannot by itself account for our objects of perception. Some other kind of cognitive processes must also be taking place.

Since atomism as the basis for a theory of perception is inadequate, Vasubandhu argues that it would be better to acknowledge that all apparent objects (*artha*) of perception are cognitive constructs inseparable from our engagement with them. That is, he concludes, "it is proven that the objects of sensory perception are just *vijñapti*" (ad verse 15).

Is direct perception possible?

Vasubandhu's opponents are still unconvinced. A Sautrāntika objects to his interpretation of *artha*, claiming that direct veridical cognition (*pratyakṣa*) is the most important cognitive tool or means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). Without an actual, real *artha*, how can we be sure that "this is directly cognized by me?" (ad verse 16a). Indeed, without such an *artha*, how can one even call it *direct* cognition?

The Sautrāntika argument, though, is undermined by one of its key doctrines: that all dharmas are strictly momentary. Accordingly, Vasubandhu evokes the standard Buddhist view that while direct *sense* perception occurs through the five sensory faculties, our awareness *that* we are seeing, smelling, touching, and so on only occurs with the sixth mode: mental awareness. That is, mental awareness takes the *immediately preceding moment* of sensory awareness as its object. Thus these two moments of cognitive awareness—first sensory, then mental—are sequential, not simultaneous. Echoing the critique in the *Stages of Yogic Practice*'s "Proof Portion," Vasubandhu notes that if all dharmas are indeed momentary, then our self-awareness—"this is directly perceived by me"—would in fact be *indirect*, since it only occurs after the original sensory awareness has ceased. How then, Vasubandhu asks, "could a momentary object be considered directly perceptible?" (ad verse 16).

The opponent concedes Vasubandhu's point about mental awareness but retorts,

> A previously experienced object (*artha*) is remembered by mental awareness. . . . Seeing or smelling and so on is what we mean by experience (ad verse 16).

It is the *initial* sights and smells, they claim, that are the direct perceptions upon which subsequent mental awareness arises—the awareness *that* we have seen, heard, and so forth.

Vasubandhu responds that this simply begs the question, in that it already assumes what it sets out to prove: that we have direct knowledge of objects independent of, or at least unmediated by, our cognitive processes. He argues that what they are claiming to be *direct perception* is effectively a form of memory, since the initial sense perception has ceased by the time the subsequent mental awareness arises. And this memory is just as easily explained by an initial *vijñapti* as it is by an initial external object. As Vasubandhu explains:

> From that [earlier] perception arises a [later] perception that is a mental awareness; that mental awareness occurs with memory, and as the conceptualization of material form and so on, it has the *appearance* of an object (ad verse 17b).

In short, if we haven't already established the status of these perceptions in the first place, then our "memories" of them cannot prove one way or the other that they ever referred to objects existing independently of our cognitive processes.[216] They provide no direct evidence for anything outside those processes. In the end, they too are just *vijñapti* about *vijñapti*.

Intersubjectivity: The Causality That Counts

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs,

216. The philosopher Edward Feser has summarized a very similar argument in defense of a kind of indirect realism, drawing on a summary by Howard Robinson: "1. By stimulating the brain so as artificially to produce a neural process that is normally associated with a certain veridical perceptual experience, it is possible in principle to bring about a hallucination that is subjectively indistinguishable from that experience. 2. But if the immediate causes of veridical perceptual experiences and their hallucinatory counterparts are of the same sort, then these effects must be of the same sort as well. 3. In the case of hallucinations, the effect is obviously direct awareness not of any external physical object, but rather of a subjective mental, perceptual representation of an external object. 4. So in the case of veridical perceptual experience too, what one is directly aware of must be a subjective perceptual representation" (2006, 9–10).

> and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science
> in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.
> —Clifford Geertz[217]

Vasubandhu's opponent now returns to a topic raised above in relation to the hell realms: Where does karma come to fruition? Like those who objected to the concept of emptiness in the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, the Buddhist realist is concerned about the efficacy of Buddhist practice, particularly of karma. If all apparent objects (*artha*) are just *vijñapti* arising from specific transformations of individuals' minds, then how can there be any effects stemming from our actions in the world? Why would we not be isolated in a purely subjective solipsism, one that would undermine the possibility of moral consequences? Wouldn't all this follow from the insubstantial, dreamlike world suggested by this idea of *vijñaptimātra*?

Vasubandhu disagrees, rejecting a purely solipsistic subjectivity by affirming the efficacy of causal relations, albeit at the intersubjective level:

> The influence of perceptions is reciprocal, one predominating over another. . . .
>
> Hence, a particular perception arises in one mindstream based on a particular perception in another mindstream. (verse 18ab)

In other words, the perceptions (*vijñapti*)—indeed the shared sentience—of sentient beings mutually affect one another. Vasubandhu is suggesting that we live in common worlds based on common cognitive domains and therefore share common experiences and perceptions—not that nothing whatsoever exists outside our own individual minds. Note, too, that Vasubandhu is *not* challenging the traditional idea that there are multiple mindstreams that influence each other.

But, the realist objects, if our experience is tantamount to a dream, then why do the actions we perform while awake have such different results from those in our dreams? Because, Vasubandhu explains, "the mind is dulled during sleep" (verse 18cd). That is, it is the strength of our mental processes

217. Geertz 1973, 5.

that determines the difference between actions performed while sleeping and waking, not the presence or absence of some putative independent, objects.

Still, the opponent insists—concerned about the nihilistic implications like those that emptiness seems to threaten—if all apparent objects are mere perceptions, wouldn't this mean that there are no objective bodies? And if so, then killing would not be an evil action. Vasubandhu replies that the moral or karmic quality of our actions are determined, at bottom, by our intentions, such as anger, not by the presence or absence of apparent, putative objects.

Vasubandhu is making a profound point about the relation between ignorance and action in these exchanges: our actions, experiences, and perceptions (*vijñapti*) all have effects even if they do not directly correspond to some independently existing world, about which, in any case, we ordinary beings have no undisputed, absolute knowledge.

We are familiar with this line of reasoning in other guises. Modern people use the term "myth" in a pejorative sense to characterize the illusions other people labor under. For example, the widespread and deeply entrenched myths of the inherent superiority of one culture or group over another—of whites over blacks or males over females, for example—persist even though they are not supported by any evidence. These shared cognitive constructs persist untethered to "objectively" existing conditions in the world. Yet, due to "mutual influence," they still have obvious and deleterious effects. In other words, we already recognize that there are many beliefs and attitudes, along with their attendant behaviors, for which there is no direct correspondence between peoples' collective perceptions—their shared *vijñapti*—and "real" objects in the world.

This does not mean that such collective perceptions have no meaningful effect. Even without such "objective" correspondences, our cognitive processes and shared cultural lives are fully functional. Nāgārjuna made this logical point about conventional discourse: words and concepts are meaningful and function in relation to each other and according to how they are used, not because they fully correspond to some "objective" reality. Vasubandhu is making a similar point about our cognitive processes: our perceptions occur in dependence on a multitude of supporting conditions, and even if they do not correspond exactly to some external "reality," they never-

theless provide shared, practical knowledge—for better or for worse. Our common worlds, with their common perceptions, and all-too-common prejudices and painful consequences—that is, culture—are real enough. All too real.

In short, the lack of purely "objective" knowledge does not lead to moral nihilism, nor to the inability to discern karmic causal relationships. Rather, Vasubandhu is arguing that karmic causality operates at the level of sentience, within and between sentient beings, and he is rejecting the notion that intentions, actions, and their consequences—that is, karma—can be reduced to the level of mere materiality. Not only are apparent "objects" largely products of our constructive processes, so too are our shared worlds, like those of the hell beings whose common fate is based on their common karma. Or, in modern parlance, our lives are collectively constructed based on our shared social and cultural attitudes and their accompanying behavioral patterns. Thus, far from leading to moral nihilism, in the Mahāyāna view it is the *denial* of our constructive role in creating these worlds—of our karma—that instills ignorance and apathy.

The mere-icon theory of Donald Hoffman

As we have seen, cognitive scientists have come to remarkably Yogācāra-like conclusions. Donald Hoffman (1998 and 2019) studies visual systems using mathematical models of perception. His TED talk "Do We See Reality as It Is?" uncannily parallels the arguments that Vasubandhu makes in the *Twenty Verses*,[218] so it is worth tracing his theses, objections, and counterarguments. He argues that our understanding of the relation between the brain and consciousness has reached an impasse because our conceptual framework is incorrect. Perception does not give us an accurate picture of the world; rather it functions like an icon on our computer desktop—it stands

218. https://www.ted.com/talks/donald_hoffman_do_we_see_reality_as_it_is?language=en

for or refers to a larger reality. The causal properties underlying perception, moreover, do not lie within atoms, or even within brains and neurons, but in that "ineffable reality" for which all our perceptions and conceptions serve as useful interfaces. And this causality functions through conscious beings influencing each other's experiences and behaviors.

Hoffman begins by raising doubts about the accuracy of our perceptions, recalling common visual anomalies: the world appears flat, the sun appears to rise and set, visual illusions on the page appear to shimmer, and so on. Research has demonstrated that visual experience is deeply constructed—indeed, these constructive processes employ a full third of our entire cortex.

To the empiricists' objection that perceptions must be accurate or we would not have survived as a species, Hoffman responds that evolution does not require wholly *accurate* representations, only functional ones that lead to reproductive fitness. Male Australian jewel beetles, for example, mistake beer bottles for female beetles—but this misperception has not driven them to extinction. In evolution, pragmatic outcomes supersede perceptual truth.

Perception is more like an icon that functions as an interface with reality, he argues. An icon doesn't need to have the same characteristics as the underlying reality—nor do our perceptions.

To the objection that effective causal properties must lie in the material atoms underlying those icons, Hoffman responds that this is a logical error, like examining the pixels of the icon on the desktop in order to find the data. The concept of "atoms" is also just another icon.

But if perceptions were mere icons, the interlocutor objects, why not just walk in front of a train? We are not saying there is no reality whatsoever, Hoffman retorts. The icons do reflect an underlying reality, where the effective causal power is—which we should take seriously but not literally. Icons serve as an interface with that ineffable reality. But they are still mere icons.

He similarly responds to the objection that cognitive processes are purely a function of the brain and neurons: this is the same logical error. "Brains and neurons" are just more icons.

Hoffman concludes that if perceptions are neither wholly accurate, nor originate within material processes alone, then the causal processes that most concern us lie in a "vast interacting network of conscious agents that cause each other's conscious experiences."

Waking Up from Our Dream State

He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes;
he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt.
While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream
he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he
know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening
when we know that this is all a great dream.
—Zhuangzi[219]

Vasubandhu's realist opponent remains unconvinced, still stuck on the image of dreams. If our present perceptions, like objects in a dream, lack truly independent objects, he protests, then worldly people would be aware of that, just as when they wake up from a dream and realize they have been dreaming. Vasubandhu responds by evoking the etymology of the *buddha* as one who has awakened from the ubiquitous sleep of ignorance and grasping at the twin imputations of subject and object, and who now finally and fully sees reality as it is. The rest of us, by contrast, have yet to awaken from our slumbers. In Bruce Hall's masterful translation:

> In this way, the world—asleep with a sleep that is the residue (*vāsanā*) of the imposition of false conceptualizing—is seeing, as in a dream, an unreal referent. Not having been awakened, it does not understand, as it is, the unreality of that.
>
> But, when one has been awakened through obtaining the

219. Watson 1996, 43.

> transcendental nonconceptual wisdom that is the antidote to that [sleep], then—through the direct realization of the purified mundane wisdom that is obtained after that—one understands, as it is, the non-reality of the object (ad verse 17cd).[220]

This is the understanding of those who have awakened (*prabuddha*) through transcendental nonconceptual wisdom (*lokottara nirvikalpa jñāna*) and are no longer blinded by mundane constructions such as grasper and grasped—that is, by the Cartesian Theater.

Such wisdom does not, however, preclude awakened beings from understanding or expressing themselves in the same terms that blind the rest of us. In classical Yogācāra, after obtaining the transcendental nonconceptual wisdom, awakened ones are able to skillfully operate in our somnambulant world through the "direct realization of the purified mundane wisdom that is obtained after that." So even though the awakened ones can speak in terms of grasper and grasped and so forth, they do not imagine that these exist as they appear. A commentator on Vasubandhu's text, Vinītadeva (Dunne n.d., 11), explains that, on the one hand, the purified mundane wisdom that is obtained after that realization of nonconceptual wisdom eliminates even the imprints of assuming the true existence of grasper and grasped. On the other hand, this wisdom is *mundane* because, although they are not considered truly existent, the images of grasper and grasped nevertheless appear, as in the magic show, allowing awakened beings to communicate with us worldly folks on our own prosaic level. Only the awakened ones are fully awake in our dualistic dream world—for them alone are "sleeping and waking the same" (Dunne n.d., v. 17cd).

This is the final argument for *vijñaptimātra*. In the words of Bruce Hall (1986, 18) again:

> Rather than asserting "mind-only" as the true nature of unconditioned reality, Vasubandhu presents "mind-only" as a description of our delusion: the dreams of this sleep from which the Buddha has awakened. It is, after all, *saṃsāra* that is declared to be *vijñaptimātra*.

220. Hall 1986, 17 (modified).

Is "reality" for Vasubandhu fundamentally mental? Is that even the right question? I think not. There is, of course, a strong emphasis in all Buddhist traditions on sentience, on experience in general. Buddhists observe that the world is in constant flux and that all things are enmeshed in interactive causal relations. But this is also the prevailing view of science. What distinguishes Buddhism is its emphasis on suffering and its alleviation. That is, there are *three* marks of existence—impermanence, lack of essence, and unsatisfactoriness—not just two. As Gaston Bachelard (1980, 14) notes, "All knowledge is in response to a question. If there were no question, there would be no scientific knowledge." And the basic question driving most Buddhist inquiry is: How does suffering arise from ignorance and desire, and how can it be alleviated?

This is the framework within which we have examined the Yogācāra critique of apparently independent objects. The *Twenty Verses* states that all apparent objects, all *artha* are just appearances or perceptions, just *vijñapti*. And this, according to Vasubandhu, is the entrance to the realization that dharmas have no intrinsic essence. We are ordinarily blinded by ignorance and desire and do not realize that all our perceptions are constructed by and mediated through unconscious cognitive schemas. Though these schemas are invisible to us, it is only through them that we perceive—as through a glass darkly—not *the* world but *a* world, one necessarily correlated with our faculties, our predispositions, and so forth. In this sense, we have no certainty that our cognitive objects actually exist as they appear—for the simple reason that we cannot get outside our cognitive or conceptual frameworks to directly compare them with reality. To imagine otherwise—to argue as if we *already* have truly objective knowledge—would be to assume, hubristically, a Buddha's-eye view of the world.

Vasubandhu's emphasis on the constructed nature of experience, including our reflexive awareness of it, does not entail an ontological commitment to "mind" as the sole or primary reality. Rather, it points to or circumscribes the limits of our worldly knowledge. And that is the role played by the notion that all *artha* are just *vijñapti*—it helps us realize, through the analysis of our own cognitive processes, that we are caught in webs of meaning we have constructed ourselves. *Vijñaptimātra*, then, is not another ontological description of what *is*; it's a critical concept, which, like the notion of

emptiness, must be abandoned once it has served its purpose as a remedy to our reifying tendencies.

Vasubandhu thus reminds us in his last verse that for Mahāyānists ultimate reality is inexpressible, beyond concepts or words. All of its characterizations and appearances are necessarily relative, circumscribed, and conventional. This does not mean that Yogācārins think there is no reality apart from appearances, but, the tradition insists, a buddha is the *only one* who see things as they truly are, "since nothing impedes their awareness of every aspect of all that can be known" (ad verse 22d).

How this insight might come about, how we might progress from knowing worldly things (*dharma*) to seeing the nature of reality itself (*dharmatā*), is the topic of the next chapter.

8

Cutting through Appearances: Maitreya's *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature*

That which is without its own characteristic is unborn.
That which is unborn is unceasing.
That which is unborn and unceasing is primordially in the state of peace.
That which is primordially in the state of peace is naturally
in the state of nirvāṇa.
For that which is naturally in the state of nirvāṇa, there is
nothing in the slightest to be passed into the state of nirvāṇa.
—*Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*

Lights flicker from the opposite loft
In this room the heat pipes just cough
The country music station plays soft
But there's nothing really nothing to turn off.
—Bob Dylan, "Visions of Johanna"

IT HAS BEEN quite a journey from the early teachings of the Buddha, with their causal analyses of how we remain bound to appearances and how we may free ourselves from them, to the more sophisticated developments in Abhidharma, early Mahāyāna, and Yogācāra. What connects them is the insight that we can better understand our experience—our perceptions and conceptions—and the actions they inform and instigate if we see them in terms of *patterns of interaction*, such as the formulations of dependent arising articulated in the early discourses and placed front and center in Yogācāra's three-nature theory.

In the Buddhist view, consistent with mainstream cognitive science, we are predisposed to imagine there is an independently existing world *out there*, populated by preexisting entities, identities, and intrinsic meanings, from which we are in some sense originally separate. If we analyze carefully, however, what we find instead is that we are a whirlwind of processes in ceaseless interaction, whose causal regularities we may, with diligent analysis, discern in various, albeit conventional, ways. In other words, insofar as we fundamentally misunderstand how the world works (its ontology), then our understanding of the world (our epistemology) is deeply flawed.

Unlike most cognitive scientists, however, Mahāyāna Buddhists maintain that we can learn to see reality directly, unmediated by our imagination, untarnished by our affective dispositions, and undistorted by our cognitive obscurations. Bodhisattvas set out both to accomplish this task and to guide others to the same realization.

Such a transformation is the main purpose of Yogācāra teachings. As previously, we will walk through one succinct but essential Yogācāra text, one that focuses on just this transformation: *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature* (*Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, or DDV).

Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature shows how illusions arise and do their dirty work—even though they do not represent ultimately *real* phenomena—via the cognitive processes outlined in the *ālayavijñāna* model. It shows how these errant understandings can be dismantled in meditative practice, leading to the nonconceptual wisdom of awakened beings, who, tradition holds, are then able to work in the world with effortless and spontaneous wisdom and compassion.

Maitreya teaches Asaṅga

The back story of these teachings is telling. Tradition has it that the great Yogācāra master Asaṅga had been meditating in solitude for many years, yearning for a vision of Maitreya, whose name means loving-kindness (*maitrī*) and whom traditional Buddhists believe will be the next buddha to appear in our world system. Until then, he is thought to reside in the spiritual abode called Tuṣita Heaven. After twelve long years Asaṅga finally gave up questing for such a vision and left his cave in utter hopelessness. He soon came across a badly injured dog lying by the side of the road, whose open wounds were ridden with freshly hatched maggots. Out of deep compas-

sion he strove to remove the maggots from the dog's festering flesh. Lest he harm any of them—for they too are sentient beings seeking happiness—he went to remove the maggots not with his hard, coarse hands but with his soft, smooth tongue. As he lowered his outstretched tongue onto this squirming mass of maggots, the dog transformed into Maitreya himself. Maitreya then informed Asaṅga that he had been there with him in the cave all along but that Asaṅga had been too self-absorbed to realize it. It was Asaṅga's deep compassion for both the dog and the maggots that lifted this last barrier of self-centeredness and allowed him to finally see Maitreya, the living embodiment of loving-kindness itself.

Thereafter, Asaṅga received teachings directly from Maitreya in Tuṣita Heaven while remaining immersed in deep meditative absorption here on earth—much as we saw in the early Mahāyāna practice of "recollection of the Buddha" (*buddhānusmṛti*). The Tibetan tradition recognizes five texts attributed to Maitreya as transmitted through Asaṅga;[221] *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature* is one of these. Following tradition, we refer to Maitreya as their author.

Overview of the text

Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature is a short work of some three hundred lines. As before, we follow the basic outline of this text closely,[222] preserving its organizational logic, while examining those verses most relevant to our focus. We draw heavily upon Vasubandhu's more-or-less contemporaneous commentary (*Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti*), paraphrasing it *quite closely* in order to clarify Maitreya's often cryptic verses. Consistent with our focus on classical Yogācāra in India, we do not cite

221. The Five Maitreya Texts, still widely studied in the Tibetan tradition, are (1) *Ornament of Clear Realization* (*Abhisamayālaṃkāra*), (2) *Ornament of the Mahāyāna Sūtras* (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*), (3) *Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes* (*Madhyāntavibhāga*), (4) *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature* (*Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*), and (5) *Sublime Continuum* (*Ratnagotravibhāga*; also called *Uttaratantra*). The texts attributed to Maitreya in the Chinese tradition are the *Yogācārabhūmi*, **Yogavibhāga*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, and *Vajracchedikāvyākhyā*.

222. We draw upon several sources and translations of the DDV. Our translations are from the root verses and Vasubandhu's commentary (D 4028) found in Drigung (Dri). The text is found in both prose and verse forms (D 4022, 4023).

the extensive commentarial tradition on the DDV in Tibet,[223] with the exception of a few insightful comments by the nineteenth-century Tibetan savant Ju Mipham.

Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature provides guidelines for distinguishing phenomena, dharmas, as we ordinarily experience them from their ultimate nature, their reality (*dharmatā*), a synonym for *thusness* (*tathatā*). We typically mistake the appearances of phenomena for reality itself and thus remain deeply deluded about ourselves, others, and the world around us. This is *not*, the text quickly warns, because phenomena and their ultimate nature, *dharmas* and *dharmatā*, are fundamentally different ontologically. In the standard Mahāyāna view, all dharmas are already empty and therefore never truly different than ultimate reality. Their ultimate nature is always just as it is, whether we realize it or not—just as Maitreya remained ever-present during Asaṅga's long meditations whether Asaṅga realized it or not, until he broke through the final delusion of independent selfhood by his unflinching selfless actions.

The challenge is thus both cognitive and affective: to distinguish appearances from reality and thereby fundamentally transform our minds and hearts. This can be achieved, Maitreya teaches:

- By recognizing how our false imagination constructs our individual and collective worlds, realizing that phenomena as we perceive them are products of interdependent cognitive processes and are therefore mere cognitions, mere *vijñapti*.
- Based on this insight, we come to recognize the equally constructed nature of our apparent selves, thereby overcoming our deeply entrenched self-centeredness.
- This progressive realization results in a fundamental transformation from seeing the world as we usually do, in terms of the subject-object duality of the Cartesian Theater, to seeing it through the eyes of the nonconceptual wisdom that buddhas and bodhisattvas employ, beyond subject-object duality—indeed beyond any characterization whatsoever.

223. See Brunnhölzl 2012, 149–53.

- Bodhisattvas thereupon return to the world, capable of skillfully employing conventional terms and teachings, "entering the uninterrupted and effortless buddha activity."

In short, the text lays out a process of progressive awakening through discerning and then transforming the basic cognitive and affective processes we have examined in the previous chapters. This fundamental transformation[224] is brought about by nonconceptual wisdom (*nirvikalpajñāna*)[225]—the two central themes of *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature*. It is the realization of the real nature, the culmination of the process we first saw in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

Framing the Problem

Maitreya begins by laying out the basic challenge we face:

> Something to be understood and then abandoned
> and something else to be directly realized—
> this treatise was composed with the desire to distinguish them
> by means of their defining characteristics.
> If all these are summarized,
> they should be known as twofold,
> because they are all included within
> phenomena and their ultimate nature.
> Of these, what is classified as phenomena is saṃsāra.
> What is classified as the ultimate nature of phenomena
> is the transcendence of suffering of the three vehicles.

The phenomena to be "understood and then abandoned" are all saṃsāric phenomena, whose characteristic is being afflicted. By contrast, what we ought to directly realize is the ultimate nature of reality, and this is achieved by means of a fundamental transformation whose characteristic

224. *Gnas gyur pa*; *āśrayaparāvṛtti*. This is often translated as "transformation of the basis." See Brunnhölzl 2012, 52–132, for a thorough overview of it in Yogācāra texts.

225. See Brunnhölzl 2012, 132–47, and Kramer 2017.

is purification. Vasubandhu reminds us (Dri 2) that these two are differentiated *not* because they are distinct objects but because we perceive them differently. And since the ultimate nature of phenomena is characterized by this fundamental transformation, its ultimate nature is also the transcendence of suffering—that is, nirvāṇa (Dri 4). These verses clearly articulate the basic problem as Yogācārins, indeed most Buddhists, see it: there is a discrepancy between how reality is and our understanding of it. We mistake appearances for ultimate reality, *dharmas* for *dharmatā*.

In order to distinguish these two we first need to understand how such mistakes happen, their causal nexus. Maitreya outlines this process in what are by now familiar terms:

> What appears as duality and how it is designated
> is false imagination—the characteristic of phenomena.
> They are false because they appear yet do not exist.
> They are imagination because all are mere conceptions
> without objects.[226]

Duality, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 5), is the apparent duality of grasper and grasped, such as the eye and visible object. These are the support for falsely imagining that things have unchanging natures and for designating them accordingly, as if these "objects" and their characteristics are already out there and all we have to do is label them, as if the act of naming were not itself an active, constructive process. Rather, Maitreya is declaring, although appearances exist in the sense that they appear to sentient beings—just as echoes and rainbows do—they do not exist in and of themselves, since such appearances are products of our own perceptual, conceptual, and linguistic construction, produced in the interaction between our minds and our environments.

By contrast, Maitreya continues:

> Ultimate nature is characterized as thusness,
> in which there are no distinctions between

226. *artha*.

the grasped and grasper,
between designations and what they designate.

Thusness is nondual and inexpressible (*anabhilāpya*). This is because, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 7), there is no ultimate distinction between grasper and grasped, or our designations and what they refer to. We cannot ultimately differentiate between subject and object, between terms and their apparent referents, their "objects." Such distinctions are correlative and conventional, not ultimate and real. Imagining otherwise, Maitreya declares, is the basic cause of all the afflictive actions that keep us bound in saṃsāra:

Since what appears does not [ultimately] exist,
delusion is the cause of the defilements.
Because while an illusory elephant and such may appear,
what [ultimately] exists does not appear.

While it seems like selves and objects exist independently of each other, Maitreya—echoing the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*—likens them to the appearance of imaginary elephants in a magic show. Vasubandhu (Dri 8) compares this to mistaking a pile of stones marking a distant mountain path for someone hiking on it. The person *appears* to exist even if they are not there, while the stones that are there—which do exist—do not appear. In short, what appears does not ultimately exist, while what is ultimately so—thusness—does not appear.

This is, of course, the crux of the problem. If we could clearly see the reality underlying appearances and were not fooled by them, there would be no problem; alternatively, if things truly existed the way they appear to, as in the view of naïve realism, then again there would be no problem. It is this *disjunction* between false appearances and a more fundamental, underlying reality that not only constitutes our human predicament but also, Maitreya is quick to point out, the possibility of transcending it. Thus, he continues:

If there were neither the nonexistence [of duality] nor [its]
appearance,
then neither delusion nor nondelusion,

neither the defilements nor their purification,
would make sense.

Maitreya is summing up the basic dilemma—one that frames the entire text—in the first verse. In reality, for Yogācārins, there are no independently existing subjects and objects; this is the "nonexistence of duality." If this were *not* the case (note the double negative)—if there really *were* a duality between selves and entities—then our seeing that duality would not be a problem. There would be no delusion to overcome. Conversely, if the false *appearance* of duality did not occur, if we were not enmeshed in the Cartesian Theater, there would be no need for purification. After all, the possibility and promise of liberation *is only necessary* in relation to the experience of ignorance and bondage. Without this disjunction between the way things are and the way they appear, "neither delusion nor their purification would make sense." It is the disjunction that both sets up the problem of delusion and adumbrates its solution.[227]

Phenomena and their ultimate nature are ultimately nondual

As soon as Maitreya makes this distinction between apparent phenomena and their ultimate nature, however, he raises an obvious question: Doesn't this distinction suggest that these two are inherently different, that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are distinct realities? Most Mahāyāna Buddhists adamantly reject this because if that were the case, we could never get there from here—liberation would be impossible. Maitreya therefore quickly warns that although these two *seem* very different, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are not ultimately separable.

227. We find interesting parallels to this in modern science. For most purposes, what we normally perceive, the tables and people and solid objects all around us, is accurate enough. But once we come to understand their dynamic structures—atoms, particles, light waves, molecules, genes, cells, and so on—we no longer see things as unchanging, independent entities. The social sciences and humanities similarly assume that appearances are deceptive but also claim that—with proper theories and methods—we can discern not only their underlying structures but also the constructive processes that produce those false appearances. Insofar as it takes as its starting point the conviction that reality is not what it seems, science is also an extended exercise in this "hermeneutics of suspicion" (see McCauley 2000).

These two are neither the same nor different
because there [both] are and are not
differences between
what exists and does not exist.

Such classically cryptic Yogācāra verses need to be read carefully. Vasubandhu explains (Dri 10) that on the one hand, phenomena and their ultimate nature are not exactly the *same* because distinctive phenomena do not ultimately exist while ultimate reality does. On the other hand, they are not completely *different* either: the only difference is that ultimate reality lacks distinctive phenomena, distinctive objects, that can be grasped. That is, the fact that phenomena *appear* to be truly separate and independent does not mean that such distinctions are ultimately real. The appearance of individual dharmas is, like everything else, conventional and contingent. Conversely, such appearances are not completely *nonexistent* either; for if they were, then they would not instigate afflicted actions and there would be no problem called saṃsāra. The Yogācārins here—like most Buddhists—are seeking to forge a middle way between the extremes of eternalism or inherent existence on the one hand and nihilism or nonexistence on the other. All this follows from carefully examining the nature of illusion, of mistaken appearances.

Thus far, Maitreya has shown why the distinction between phenomena and ultimate reality is so crucial to the larger Buddhist project: we are confused about the relation between the phenomena we experience and what is truly real and we are therefore caught in our cognitive and affective habits. To overcome this confusion, transform our understanding and see reality as it is, we need to clarify what exactly we are confused about. What are the phenomena that need to be "understood and then abandoned" on the path toward realization?

Characteristics of phenomena: our common and uncommon lived worlds

As we've seen, the phenomena we are confused about are perceptions based on false imagination, configured by predispositions operating outside our conscious awareness. These are the cognitive appearances—the perceptions (*vijñapti*)—that constitute our animate and inanimate worlds, respectively:

> The stable abode consists of those who cycle [in saṃsāra] and
> where they cycle—
> the domain of sentient beings and the domain of the shared world.
> The domain of the shared world is the common perceptions,
> which appear as common.
> The domain of sentient beings is both
> common as well as uncommon.

This echoes what we have seen in the chapters above: our common perceptions are a function of our common predispositions, which have been "fattened" by similar past actions. And these give rise to the semblance of similar objective worlds—the stable abodes—that support our individual and collective lives. These *worlds* are not wholly independent of the beings who inhabit them, but they seem to be objective because these worlds, with their common perceptions (*vijñapti*), appear similarly to beings with similar faculties. What do we have in common with each other?

Maitreya continues:

> Birth, conventional [behavior], being nurtured and defeated,
> benefit and harm, qualities and defects, are common
> because they mutually influence one another
> by being mutually empowering [conditions].[228]

The reason Maitreya mentions these multiple "mutually empowering" conditions, Vasubandhu reasons (Dri 15), is to avoid focusing on the cognitive object as the main cause. That is, Maitreya is emphasizing that it is this larger context, the shared environment and common faculties that undergird our common experiences—and *not* the apparently independent objects we perceive—that primarily accounts for the way we experience the world. Recall the passage from Asaṅga's *Summary of Mahāyāna* in chapter 6:

> The perceptions that appear as the shared world . . . [are] common because these perceptions appear similarly to all who experience them through the force of maturation that is in accordance with their own similar karma (ad MSg 1.60).

228. *Phan tshun du bdag po nyid.* See *Viṃśatikā*, verse 18ab: *anyonyādhipatitvena.*

For example, due to our similar faculties and shared human experience, each of us may apprehend what we take as a "tree." But that does not make it a *truly* independent object, because what a *tree* is for human beings is not the same thing that a collection of leaves, roots, branches, and so on is for the many birds, animals, and insects whose abode and food it is—not to mention the bacteria without which it could not survive. In other words, the main reason we perceive phenomena so similarly is not primarily due to the "same" objects impinging on our common sensory faculties but due to our common faculties, and—especially for us humans—our common conventions and mutually sustaining interactions. As Maitreya puts it, we are *empowering conditions* for our shared worlds, for our collectively wrought cultural and social worlds—as Vasubandhu also discussed at the end of his *Twenty Verses*.

Some aspects of our lives, though, are not shared. Vasubandhu (Dri 14) is quick to point out that even though these worlds, these *vijñapti*, are common to many beings, they are nonetheless *experienced individually*, just as each and every person watching the World Cup is individually experiencing a similar phenomenon. That is, the distinct forms of awareness that appear as the world arise in each individual mindstream (Tib. *rgyud so so*). So, while these worlds are experienced similarly by similar beings with similar karma, they nevertheless each experience them individually.

Thus the most crucial conditions of our individual lives—the karmic trajectories of our mindstreams through which we are born, live and die, and may eventually reach liberation—are based on our individual actions, which are not shared. Maitreya enumerates these:

> The abode and cognitive appearances,
> happiness, suffering, and karma,
> death and transmigration,
> birth, bondage, and liberation are not common.
> Therefore these are uncommon abodes.

"Abode," Vasubandhu explains (Dri 15), refers to *ālayavijñāna*, because it is the abode of the predispositions for the appearances, the *vijñapti*, that appear as our world. *Vijñapti*, he continues, refers to the six kinds of manifest awareness. Strictly speaking, he reiterates, all of these are experienced individually.

Let's recall the larger context of this discussion: at the outset Maitreya distinguished between phenomena and their ultimate nature, arguing that, although they are not ultimately different, nevertheless our deluded understanding of phenomena instigates afflictive actions that lead to conventional causal consequences. It is these karmic energies—these habits—that perpetuate our individual lives, propel our mindstreams, and constitute our individual karmic trajectories, our saṃsāric existence. Thus, despite the many aspects of the species-specific world that we share in common, we nevertheless each experience it through our own cognitive processes—watching the magic show together in the darkened Cartesian Theater of our collective fabrications.

These apparent worlds and objects are, of course, mere appearances, mere perceptions, which we never apprehend apart from our cognitive and affective processes. They are dependently arisen phenomena lacking their own natures or characteristics—that is, they are empty.

The Path to Nonconceptual Wisdom

Deconstructing the duality of object and subject logically (1)

Maitreya now addresses the distinctive Yogācāra definition of emptiness—the nonduality of grasper and grasped, of subject and object—by critiquing the idea that either of these makes sense without the other. *Subject* and *object* are not straightforward terms referring to what exists independently in the world. Rather, as we saw in the analyses of dependent arising in early Buddhism, these terms refer to *products* of our constructive cognitive processes: experience arises *in terms of* something that is grasped (*grāhya*) by someone who is grasping (*grāhaka*). These are unavoidably relational terms.[229]

The next few verses represent the first of three critiques in *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature* of our ingrained sense of subject-object duality. This *logical* critique of our ordinary dualistic assumptions entails a sequential process in which the independent existence first of the

229. As Mipham reminds us: "If what appears to be apprehended does not exist by its very own *essence* apart from that which apprehends it, then what appears to be the apprehender does not exist either. The reason, here, is that the apprehender exists *in relation* to the apprehended, not in isolation" (Dhc 26; emphasis added).

object and then of the subject are analyzed and deconstructed. (Maitreya will replicate this pattern below when describing how one first develops and then realizes nonconceptual wisdom in contemplative practice.) First, Maitreya rejects the idea that what appears are actual, independently existing objects:

> The appearance of a common, external grasped object
> is the perception of the grasping subject.
> There are no objects external to consciousness
> because they are common.

We return to the classic Yogācāra critique of apparently independently existing objects. According to Vasubandhu (Dri 18), our apprehended objects are not independently existing, external referents (*artha*) because, although common objects in our shared world might seem to be external to and independent of us, these are not the actual objects of our awareness. Rather, he reiterates, what we perceive is nothing but the *vijñapti* of the one who is grasping that apparent object. Therefore what we actually apprehend is not an *in*dependently existing, external object but an inseparable aspect of an *inter*dependent cognitive process.

This should be a familiar argument by now. Even though "common objects" are objects of cognition for a large number of individuals with similar faculties, that does not mean we are all cognizing exactly the same object with its own independent nature. It only means that each one of us is apprehending similar appearances. The mere similarity of appearances does not, in and of itself, establish the existence of objects apart from our engagement with them—as in Vasubandhu's example of the hell realms in the *Twenty Verses*. The apparent objectivity of such objects is a function of our similar faculties, cognitive schemas, and predispositions working in accord with each other and our shared world—and not, as we naïvely imagine, due to their ultimate objectivity.

Does this mean that Yogācārins are arguing that mind and mind alone is what truly exists, as many interpreters have long insisted? After all, the verse says: "There are no objects (*artha*) external to consciousness." What could be simpler? Such an interpretation might seem plausible if we stopped there and took this verse in isolation: since there are no objects external to consciousness, then everything arises from consciousness alone—indeed,

perhaps everything simply *is* consciousness. But we need to read the entire verse.

Maitreya thus takes the next logical step.

> When it is shown[230] that what appears as a grasped object does not exist,
> then it is shown that what appears as a grasping subject does not exist.
> In this way, the nonexistence of what appears as grasped and grasper is demonstrated.

For his part, Vasubandhu emphasizes the logical progression of this argument (Dri 20):

> Because if there is no grasped object then there is no grasping subject. It should be understood from this that engaging the absence of what appears as grasped object and grasping subject is demonstrated *in stages*.[231]

This is the sequence Maitreya and Vasubandhu have presented: we first realize that we do not experience grasped objects independent of our own cognitive processes. Since these are mutually defined, we then conclude that we too are not apprehending subjects independent of those apprehended objects. And this leads to the conclusion that neither of them exists independently of the other.

Let us pause here. The critical point that what appear to be independently existing objects are just cognitive appearances—that *artha* are just *vijñapti*—is presented as the *first* step in a line of reasoning that then immediately rejects the correlative notion of an independently existing subject. The concept of *vijñaptimātra* presented here is as a cognitive correction, used for a specific purpose on the path, not as a universal, context-free

230. Tib. *grub pa*; Skt. *Siddha*. This term has multiple meanings: to establish, prove, demonstrate, show, accomplish, fulfill, attain.

231. Tib. *rim gyis grub pa*.

proposition—namely, that objects do not ultimately exist but the minds that imagine them do.

Maitreya calls this understanding of the nonduality of subject and object the "unsurpassable entrance into the characteristics of phenomena," an obvious parallel with the "entrance to selflessness of dharmas," verse 10c in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*. This leads one directly to engaging the ultimate nature of phenomena.

Toward seeing the ultimate nature of phenomena

Maitreya now begins to discuss the ultimate nature of phenomena, how we can learn to perceive this reality, and finally the liberation this transformed perception leads to. Maitreya describes this in terms of six "unsurpassable ways of engaging the ultimate nature of phenomena"—characteristics, basis, discernment, contact, recollection, and arriving at its own nature. The last of these—arriving at its own nature—takes up most of the rest of Maitreya's text, as well as our chapter. This process of engagement is briefly correlated with the five paths in Mahāyāna teachings—the paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, cultivation, and no more learning—through which one develops the direct insight into reality that culminates in buddhahood.

The *characteristic* of the ultimate nature of phenomena is thusness, where—as defined at the beginning of the treatise—"there are no distinctions between the grasper and grasped, between designations and what they designate." The *basis* for directly engaging ultimate reality, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 22), is learning how to at least conventionally distinguish it from the afflicted phenomena, as we have just reviewed, based on implementing the pure teachings of the Buddha's words.

One approaches the *discernment* of ultimate reality by first relying on the path of accumulation, in which one accumulates the conditions for direct insight into ultimate reality by, for example, abandoning worldly goals and aspiring to attain liberation for the sake of all beings (Dhc 31). One prepares for this insight on the path of preparation, Vasubandhu notes, through the traditional threefold trainings: studying the Mahāyāna teachings, reflecting on their meaning and significance, and putting them into practice (Dri 23).

One is then ready for the next stage, the path of seeing, in which one sees ultimate reality—thusness—directly as it is, unmediated by conceptual constructs. This is direct contact with ultimate reality, Maitreya explains:

Because one has attained the correct view,
contact is attaining and experiencing thusness
by way of direct perception
through the path of seeing.

One is now able to develop this through the path of cultivation by *recollecting* over and over one's previous direct realization of thusness on the path of seeing. Recollecting the factors leading to that realization and rehearsing them again and again gradually eliminates any remaining stains.

The final "unsurpassable way to engage ultimate nature" is the fundamental transformation from our obscured and afflicted way of understanding and engaging the world to finally *arriving at its nature*, the stainless view of reality that the buddhas and bodhisattvas enjoy, where "everything appears simply as thusness," just as it is, free from reified notions of selves and essences, subjects and objects. This constitutes the final stage, the path of no more learning, which culminates in buddhahood. At this point, one's understanding of reality finally accords with the way things truly are, their thusness.[232]

Fundamental Transformation

After framing the problem of mistaking phenomena and their ultimate nature and then outlining the solution, Maitreya now briefly adumbrates what the realization of thusness entails. First, he restates the basic problem: that while the ultimate nature of phenomena is always pure and stainless, our emotional defilements and cognitive obscurations, which are merely adventitious or incidental, prevent us from seeing this—until, that is, one undergoes a fundamental transformation. Once this transformation occurs, the appearance of our world completely changes, for we are now able to see everything as multifarious manifestations of thusness. Our world, our languages, our minds are transformed in three distinct ways.

Upon engaging its basic entities,
the perception of the common shared world is transformed into
thusness;

232. See Griffiths et al. 1989 for a full account of the Yogācāra conception of buddhahood.

the field of phenomena (*dharmadhātu*) [embodied] in the sūtras is transformed into thusness;
and the perception of the unshared world of individual sentient beings is transformed into thusness.

That is, the entire world is now seen as a manifestation of undifferentiated thusness, which is transmitted through the stainless sound of Mahāyāna sūtras that skillfully communicate the ultimate as well as conventional nature of all phenomena. According to Maitreya, this is fully accomplished only by Mahāyāna practitioners.

Thus only buddhas and bodhisattvas are said to reach "the distinctive attainments of seeing, instruction, and mastery." These three attainments are tellingly correlated with the three buddha bodies. Vasubandhu (Dri 29) explains that *seeing* refers to the ability to directly perceive all aspects of things that can be known—a kind of omniscience[233] concomitant with attaining the dharma body (*dharmakāya*). *Instruction*, a quality of the body of enjoyment (*saṃbhogakāya*), refers to the ability to teach "the profound, extensive, wondrous, and inconceivable" teachings of the Mahāyāna. And attaining *mastery*, correlated with the emanation body (*nirmāṇakāya*), refers to the unhindered and inconceivable qualities, such as the superknowledges, that support beneficial activities for the sake of all sentient beings.[234]

Of course, one must have certain prerequisites to accomplish this "unsurpassable" fundamental transformation. One needs, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 31), to have aspired toward complete awakening for the sake of all beings (rather than merely one's own personal liberation). One must focus on the distinctive Mahāyāna teachings, both individually and in the aggregate, as well as on their ultimate thusness. Finally, one needs to follow the distinctive training in the ten bodhisattva stages, wherein one develops remedies for all obscurations. All these set the stage for realizing nonconceptual wisdom, the fundamental transformation in Yogācāra—which Maitreya will now take up at length.

233. See McClintock 2010, 165–235.

234. See Makransky 1997.

Developing Nonconceptual Wisdom

The transformation from our ordinary, obscured understanding of the world to the pristine vision of reality *as it is* is said to be brought about through a gradual process of cognitive and affective purification in which one directly realizes ever more subtle levels of emptiness and lets go of ever more subtle forms of clinging—even to the Buddhist practices that brought one to these realizations. The basis for this fundamental transformation is nonconceptual wisdom. In the Yogācāra tradition buddhas and bodhisattvas are said to engage the world, not through the obscuring lens of the emotional and cognitive obscurations that blind the rest of us but through nonconceptual wisdom, a mode of direct perception that simultaneously sees the thusness of all things as well as their discrete particularity. These are not two separate realities but two modes of seeing things—as ultimately empty yet conventionally distinct.

Maitreya outlines the way to develop nonconceptual wisdom in six points:

> By engaging the focal objects,
> by abandoning the marks,
> by its correct practice,
> by its characteristics,
> by its benefits, and
> by thorough understanding.

For nonconceptual wisdom to arise, Vasubandhu says (Dri 33), we must first *engage* Mahāyāna teaching with determination and confidence and accumulate a sufficient stock of wisdom and merit conducive to completing the path.

Next we need to *abandon* the "marks"—that is, everything that obstructs nonconceptual wisdom, from the coarsest to the subtlest obstacle, including even the factors that help bring one to the threshold of nonconceptuality.[235] There are four such marks:

235. This echoes a similar process in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* above on pages 189–90.

One abandons the marks
of factors antagonistic [to the path],
of [their] remedies,
of thusness, and
of realization.
One thereby fully and successively abandons the marks
that are coarse, intermediate, and subtle
and that are connected [to one's mindstream] for a long time.

The first two are relatively straightforward. The marks or qualities that are antagonistic to the path, such as desire, are coarse because they are the cause of the negative tendencies (*dauṣṭhulya*) and are thus relatively easy to identify. Their remedy—contemplating the repulsive nature of desired objects—is an intermediate mark or quality and should be abandoned in turn.

Now it gets interesting. One must also abandon the subtle marks, which are themselves the remedies for the coarser ones. The very *concept* of thusness, Vasubandhu continues (Dri 34), is an obstacle to nonconceptual wisdom insofar as even the effort (Tib. *'bad rtsol yang*) to think "this is thusness" needs to be abandoned. "Thusness" itself is a subtle mark because it is the remedy for everything that one has realized in order to have reached this point. And one needs to abandon even those realizations one has attained and familiarized oneself with in the earlier bodhisattva stages—those that have been "connected [to one's mindstream] for a long time." In other words, while one needs to use concepts and exert effort to *prepare* for the realization of thusness, one needs to abandon such things in order to directly realize it.

We might understand this through a simple analogy: the progression from beginning to acquire a new skill to being able to use that skill proficiently and effortlessly. When we acquire a new skill—a new language, sport, or musical instrument—we have to carefully attend to each new pattern, tactic, or technique. It takes effort and focus as well as long hours of practice for such skills to become second nature. But once one has reached that level of proficiency, then all the actions that brought one there—effort, focus, and so on—now obstruct one's ability to perform them naturally, effortlessly, and spontaneously. So they must now be abandoned. If we

can extrapolate from this everyday example to exalted levels of awareness we may not have experienced, then we may better appreciate the gradual process that mystics the world over have described as the dropping away of ever-more subtle layers of attachment, self-grasping, and conceptualization.[236] Even the thought "Ah, this is thusness," Vasubandhu sighs, becomes just another subtle obstacle to let go of (Dri 34).

Deconstructing the duality of object and subject in contemplative practice (2)

How, then, might we apply these insights? How do we engage in *correct practice*, the third point? Maitreya now presents a series of meditative practices that parallel at the psychological level the logical deconstruction of independently existing subjects and objects presented above. Note, once again, that *vijñaptimātra* is treated not as a definitive statement about what truly exists but as one stage in the progressive deconstruction of the dualistic framework of saṃsāric experience.

> Engaging in correct practice also has four points:
>
> 1. Practicing with a focal object
> 2. Practicing without a focal object
> 3. Practicing non-focusing on a focal object
> 4. Practicing focusing on non-focusing[237]

Briefly, Vasubandhu (Dri, 35) explains that *practicing with a focal object* leads to seeing that the apparent object is just a perception (*vijñapti*), while *practicing without a focal object* means realizing that one is not actually focusing on any object (*artha*). But if there isn't any independent object to cognize, then *practicing non-focusing on a focal object* would itself be flawed,

236. See, for example, the concepts of *fanā* and *baqā* in Islamic Sufi traditions, in which the *sufi* loses all self-identity and become suffused with divine qualities, respectively. Thanks to my colleague, Ata Anzali, for this reference. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/baqa-wa-fana-sufi-term-signifying-subsistence-and-passing-away.

237. The term *dmigs pa* can mean either the focal object or the process of focusing on an object (like the noun *painting* can be either an object or an activity, as in "painting is relaxing").

he states, "because perception make no sense without an object to perceive."[238] This leads to *practicing focusing on non-focusing*, because by non-focusing on either of them, one is then focusing on nonduality.

These verses make *experiential* sense as a description of the progressive letting go of our usual subject-object duality. First, by *practicing on a focal object* we come to realize that any object we perceive is inseparable from our own cognitive processes: it is a mere *vijñapti*. In the second step, *practicing without a focal object*, we realize that we are *already* practicing without a truly independent object. The third step, *practicing non-focusing on a focal object*, means that—given that the very notion of perception only makes sense in relation to some "thing" that is perceived—we realize that the dualistic framework itself is flawed "because perception make no sense without an object to perceive." Finally, we give up imagining that any experience can be adequately explained in terms of either independently existing objects or subjects and stop superimposing either of these categories onto the totality of experience—that is, we focus on nonduality.

We might be feeling a bit of vertigo here. It is disconcerting to realize how little certainty we have about the objectivity of our world, but at least we can reason our way through it: yes, there are people who are differentially "sighted." And, yes, there are different species that have wholly different sensory domains. And thanks to advances in scientific instruments—microscopes, telescopes, x-ray machines, and so on—we now realize that there always were vast worlds laying imperceptibly all around us and most likely are further worlds yet to discover. So we might appreciate Ju Mipham's point that "it is easy to realize that external objects are devoid of nature." But, he immediately warns, "the nonobservation of the mind that apprehends them is more difficult" (Dhc 44).

It is not just "more difficult," it is downright unnerving for most of us to realize that we don't have any more certainty about the reality of our own subjective experience than we do about external objects. This is the final blow to the Cartesian Theater and our last grasp on certain knowledge—

238. This is tricky. Like the word *painting* noted above, the Tibetan for *vijñapti* (*rnam par rig pa*) is the same in both nominal and verbal forms. One might translate it as: "because *vijñapti* is not tenable without an object that is *vijñaptized*" (*rnam par rig pa bya ba'i don med na rnam par rig pa mi 'thad pa'i phyir ro*).

short of buddhahood, that is. For it means that subjectivity is just as constructed, just as fallible, and just as dependent and empty as the objects it purports to perceive.

Rather than threatening total insecurity and insanity, however, Buddhists see this insight as the doorway to awakening, the insight that liberates us from our deepest fears, our most fundamental flaws, and our strongest and subtlest form of self-grasping. This, in short, is the doorway to a transformation at the most basic level of our being, after which we will never see the world the same way again.

Realizing nonconceptual wisdom: the world transformed

Having reached the full fruition of nonconceptual awareness, Maitreya now describes how the world appears without the mediation of concepts or the superimposition of self and other—in other words, how the world appears from a "buddha's-eye view." This nonconceptual wisdom has three main *characteristics*:

> By *abiding* in ultimate nature,
> one fully abides in the nondual and
> inexpressible ultimate nature.
>
> In [their] *nonappearance*,
> neither duality,
> their corresponding designations,
> the sense faculties, objects, or awareness,
> nor the shared world appear.
> Therefore the characteristics of nonconceptual wisdom
> are presented as in the sūtras:
> they are called inconceivable, indemonstrable, and groundless,
> without appearance, awareness, or abode.
>
> In [their] *appearance*
> all phenomena appear
> equal to the center of space,
> because all conditioned phenomena
> appear like illusions and so forth.

The first characteristic is general. Since the object of nonconceptual wisdom is the ultimate nature of phenomena, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 37), *abiding* in it means abiding in its "nondual and inexpressible ultimate nature."

Thus the second characteristic: when all the phenomena that we ordinarily experience—subject-object duality, reified designations, and our discrete sensory processes with their "faculties, objects, and awareness" as well as our surrounding shared world—when all these fail to appear, *this* is nonconceptual wisdom. Nonconceptual wisdom is now characterized, Vasubandhu continues, as "inconceivable," because it cannot be conceived dualistically in terms of the entities of grasped objects or grasping subjects. It is "indemonstrable" because it cannot be demonstrated through designations. It is "groundless" (*apratiṣṭha*) because it is not grounded in the eye faculty and so on (Brunnhölzl 2012, 382n421). It is "without appearance" because it does not appear as an object such as visible form and so forth, "without awareness" because it does not involve perception, and "without an abode" because it is not an entity that abides.

When phenomena *reappear*, accompanied by the "wisdom attained after that" nonconceptual wisdom, they all "appear equal to the center of space," like an illusion or a mirage, without any distinguishing characteristics or nature of their own. As we have seen in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* and in the first section of *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature*, phenomena have always lacked any nature of their own, so this is not a new ontology. What is new is that we are now able to *see* this directly and nonconceptually. Advanced bodhisattvas and buddhas are now said to directly and simultaneously perceive both the emptiness of any phenomenon together with its distinct appearance. This is the wisdom, Mipham states, in which "the two truths are realized to be inseparable and of one taste," in which we simultaneously "see all appearances as equal yet distinct" (Dhc 46–47).

This marks not only the reappearance of phenomena but also the return of the bodhisattva to the conventional world of ordinary beings, where they are able to operate effectively without all the prejudices and deep-seated predispositions that so pervasively and persistently plague the rest of us—doing the bodhisattva work, staging the magic show, spreading the Mahāyāna teachings to lead ever more beings to liberation.

The *benefits* of nonconceptual wisdom are therefore manifold:

> One attains the complete *dharmakāya*.
> One attains unexcelled bliss.
> One attains mastery over seeing.
> And one attains mastery over teaching.

We attain the *dharmakāya* through this fundamental transformation, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 38), and thus abide in *supreme bliss* because we abide in its very nature, having abandoned contaminated bliss. We have *mastery over seeing* because we realize the true nature and extent of what is to be known, and *mastery over teaching* because we can engage in whatever mode of teaching is appropriate to the specific needs and abilities of each and every person.

This short description of Buddhist awakening repays repeated study. But before describing this reappearance of phenomena and the return of the bodhisattva in more detail below, Maitreya pauses to clarify some easily misunderstood points.

Clarifying what nonconceptual wisdom is and is not

Lest we underestimate the nature of this transformative experience, Maitreya cautions us against considering nonconceptual wisdom as simply the cessation of conceptualization. It is nonconceptual *wisdom*, not just nonconceptuality. A *thorough understanding* of this clarifies how nonconceptual wisdom serves as a remedy for misconceptions and misunderstandings, how it differs from other kinds of nonconceptuality and from non-Mahāyāna forms of wisdom, and crucially, how it functions in practice—that is, what it results in.

Maitreya first presents nonconceptual wisdom as the *remedy* to the two extremes of existence and nonexistence, the latter of which denies even the conventional existence of phenomena. Most of these points are couched negatively. Nonconceptual wisdom is the remedy:

> For the fivefold grasping to what does not exist [ultimately]:
> grasping to phenomena and persons,
> to change and difference,
> and to denigrating [their conventional existence].

Nonconceptual wisdom is the remedy for our tendency to grasp onto things that in the final analysis *do not exist* ultimately, such as grasping onto "phenomena and persons" (Dri 40).[239] This is a classic Mahāyāna position that rejects the ultimate existence of all phenomena, including, as we have repeatedly seen, mind (*citta*) and consciousness (*vijñāna*).

Nonconceptual wisdom is also the remedy for grasping onto the notion that entities remain the same even while undergoing *change*. Such things, Buddhists argue, are simply not found: milk may curdle and become curds, but there is no unchanging entity—milk—that persists throughout this change (Mendis 1993, 40). Grasping to *difference*, Vasubandhu adds, means being attached to the idea that dharmas and their ultimate nature are truly separate—in other words, denying the inseparability of the two truths.

Finally, Maitreya rejects the extreme of absolute nonexistence, which *denies* that phenomena have any existence whatsoever. This echoes Vasubandhu's point in the *Twenty Verses* that *vijñaptimātra* rejects only the ultimate but not the conventional existence of dharmas.

This is an important point. Maitreya and Vasubandhu are warning here, in classic Mahāyāna terms, against the extreme of nonexistence. Things have their conventional, dependently arisen reality, about which we can have dependent, conventional experience and effective conventional knowledge—such as understanding suffering and the path toward its cessation, providing useful analyses of mind and how it is transformed, as well as skillfully communicating these by means of the Mahāyāna sūtras and so forth.

In a similar vein, Maitreya now delineates nonconceptual wisdom by contrasting it with five other ways in which conceptual processes are absent—in other words, by pointing out what nonconceptual wisdom is *not*. Nonconceptual *wisdom* is not simply the cessation of thinking, because it

> Excludes these five kinds [of nonconceptuality]:
> not directing the mind,
> complete transcendence,

239. The qualification that what is being denied here is "ultimate" existence (*don dam pa*; *paramārtha*) is found in Dri (40) but not in other versions of the text (Brunnhölzl 2012, 380n426).

thorough pacification,
what is [nonconceptual] by nature,
and grasping onto signs.

First, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 42), nonconceptual wisdom is not called "nonconceptual" simply by virtue of *not directing the mind* conceptually. For if that were the case, then even small children and fools would be nonconceptual, which is unacceptable. Second, nonconceptual wisdom doesn't mean merely *transcending* the use of concepts altogether, for in that case any deep meditative state, such as the second level of concentration (*dhyana*) or higher, would also be nonconceptual wisdom simply because it lacked conceptual analysis. Third, nor is the *thorough pacification* of conceptuality considered nonconceptual wisdom, because if that were the case, then deep sleep, thorough intoxication, or simple unconsciousness would also be nonconceptual wisdom. Moreover, the fourth point, nonconceptual wisdom does not refer to things that are nonconceptual *by nature*, such as inert material objects. Last, it is not sufficient to *grasp onto the signs* of nonconceptuality, since nonconceptuality does not occur merely by the thought "nonconceptuality is like this" or "I am being nonconceptual now." That is, the mere concept of nonconceptuality is just another concept. Actual nonconceptual wisdom is free of all this.

These distinctions merit careful consideration. Ideas about what being free of concepts means and the role that nonconceptuality plays on the path appear in a variety of guises (Google "the Zen of . . . "), which often obscure the differences between mere nonconceptuality and nonconceptual wisdom.

The last point Maitreya clarifies is how the practice of nonconceptual wisdom in Mahāyāna is distinguished from the relative lack of engagement with the conventional world that is said to characterize non-Mahāyāna Buddhists. Mahāyāna nonconceptual wisdom is distinguished by:

Being nonconceptual as well as unlimited,
not abiding, but enduring,
and being unsurpassable.

According to Vasubandhu (Dri 44), the nonconceptual wisdom of Mahāyānists is superior to the wisdom of the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, which suffer from five opposite characteristics. The latters' wisdom is *conceptual* since they conceive of the merits of nirvāṇa and the flaws of saṃsāra. It is *limited* because they focus on just the general marks of the four noble truths. It is *abiding* because they abide solely in nirvāṇa but not *enduring* because the five aggregates cease when they attain nirvāṇa without remainder—that is, after the demise of the body. Finally, it is *surpassable* by the wisdom of the buddhas.

The wisdom of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, by contrast, is superior in five ways. True nonconceptual wisdom, Vasubandhu explains, conceives of *neither* the merits of nirvāṇa nor the flaws of saṃsāra. It is *unlimited* because it takes as its object both the general and specific characteristics of all objects of knowledge just as they are, without false conceptualization. It is *nonabiding* because it neither clings to nirvāṇa nor rejects saṃsāra. It is *enduring* because its support, the *dharmakāya*, doesn't change, so the five aggregates persist without ceasing in nirvāṇa without remainder. And it is *unsurpassable* because there is nothing superior to it.

The common thread connecting these features is that bodhisattvas do not turn their backs on the world but stay fully embodied and engaged, neither clinging to the peace of nirvāṇa nor rejecting the faults of saṃsāra. According to Maitreya and Vasubandhu, it is this commitment to remaining and acting in the world for the benefit of all beings that distinguishes truly nonconceptual wisdom from the lesser wisdom of the non-Mahāyānists, which is still clouded, they claim, by various attachments and conceptual distinctions.[240]

The next section, "thorough understanding of nonconceptual wisdom" describes how this nonconceptual wisdom functions. Nonconceptual wisdom:

> Distances [one from] concepts,
> grants unexcelled bliss,
> frees [one] from the afflictive and cognitive obscurations,

240. It should go without saying that non-Mahāyānists would dispute these characterizations. We could consider these as analytic categories that may or may not be descriptively accurate.

comprehends all aspects of knowledge by the wisdom attained
afterward,
purifies the buddhafields, matures sentient beings,
and bestows the knowledge of all things.

Nonconceptual wisdom *distances* us from the causes of conceptualization, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 46), since it prevents them from actively arising again. It grants unsurpassable *bliss* because it accomplishes all the exceedingly superior, unmistaken, and everlasting forms of bliss by comprehending all objects of knowledge, both in their specificity and in their profound thusness. It frees us from the afflictive and cognitive *obscurations* because it completely destroys their habitual dispositions together with their subtle tendencies (*anuśaya, vāsanā*). Bodhisattvas comprehend all aspects of knowledge by the *wisdom attained after* the realization of nonconceptual wisdom by knowing the specific characteristic of each and every object. With this wisdom, they are then able to "purify buddhafields, mature sentient beings, and bestow the knowledge of all things."

This is the culmination of the path to awakening and fulfills the conditions for carrying out the bodhisattva vow. By eliminating the subtle habitual tendencies and the two obscurations—the vast domain of our cognitive unconscious (*ālayavijñāna*)—nonconceptual wisdom is said to enable bodhisattvas to see phenomena directly and clearly, freed from our usual emotional and cognitive blinders. This facilitates the skillful and compassionate work of bodhisattvas, who can now return to fully engage the world. What this entails will be discussed in more detail shortly.

Putting It All Together

Maitreya rounds up this short treatise by revisiting and summarizing the broader context for nonconceptual wisdom that he has presented throughout these verses, and that we have examined throughout this book. He first summarizes the constructive cognitive processes based on *ālayavijñāna*, and then proceeds to instruct budding bodhisattvas how to achieve its fundamental transformation by directing the mind toward nonconceptual wisdom, a process Vasubandhu notes—for the third time—that occurs in progressive stages (*go rims*).

By not knowing thusness,
that which has all the seeds[241] of false imagination
causes what does not exist [ultimately] to appear as duality
and [causes] distinct streams based on that.

We do not see the world in its true thusness, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 48), due to our predispositions toward ignorance since beginningless time. We *falsely imagine* the duality of grasped and grasper, whose appearances arise due to seeds stored in *ālayavijñāna*. That is, a "duality that does not exist appears" caused by our predispositions to be attached to that duality. And "based on that" *ālayavijñāna* with its seeds and dispositions, the distinct streams of manifest awareness—the six forms of sensory and mental awareness—arise. These interactive processes give rise to the appearances of subject and object that we consciously experience.

Understanding these erroneous processes sets the stage for the next step in the bodhisattvas' progressive reflections: the falling away of false imagination.

Therefore, though what involves cause and effect[242] has appeared,
it does not exist [ultimately].
When it appears, ultimate reality does not;
when it does not appear, ultimate reality does.
When they direct their minds correctly in this way,
bodhisattvas enter nonconceptual wisdom.

Therefore, Vasubandhu explains (Dri 49), means that ignorance is the cause of being mistaken. The appearance of *cause and effect* is nothing but the false imagination of what does not exist ultimately but that nevertheless appears within our deluded awareness. When a falsely imagined phenomenon—the duality of grasped and grasper—*appears, ultimate reality does not*, so we remain unaware of their ultimate nature, their thusness. Conversely, when

241. *Sa bon thams cad pa; sabījakam*. This was a synonym of *ālayavijñāna* in the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*.

242. We follow B 381n430 on this reading. The referent to "what involves cause and effect" is "false imagination."

these false dualities *do not appear, ultimate reality does*, because the apprehension of ultimate reality lacks the appearance of falsely imagined entities.

This is not, however, the final stage, Vasubandhu warns, because when bodhisattvas "direct their minds in this way," they are still only engaging nonconceptual wisdom through aspiration on the path of preparation. They are *preparing* to see reality directly, unmediated by conceptual constructions, but are not quite there yet.

Deconstructing object and subject to realize nonconceptual wisdom (3)

Finally, one achieves the actual realization of nonconceptual wisdom. This occurs by progressively deconstructing our experience of independently existing objects and subjects, a progression we saw twice before, but this time in terms of contemplative practice. These verses describe how to progressively deconstruct, first, the appearance of independently existing objects by realizing they are merely cognitive constructs, mere perceptions. Then, by realizing that the notion *mere perception* is only meaningful in relation to that initial imagined object, one abandons that negation as well, whereupon one realizes that there are no entities whatsoever to either grasp on to or to refute. *This* is nonconceptual wisdom. Once again, the concept and realization of *vijñaptimātra* is a skillful means of deconstructing false appearances, not as a universal claim about the status of mind or objects. We will read these verses carefully, based on Vasubandhu's comments (Dri 49), and numbering them for explanatory ease.

1. By focusing in this way,
   one focuses on mere perception
2. without focusing on an object.
3. [But] without a focus on an object,
   there is no focusing on [it as] mere perception.

4. Without focusing on that,
   one enters a focus
   where the two are not distinguished.
   The focus that does not distinguish the two
   is nonconceptual wisdom—without focus or object—

because it is distinguished
by not focusing on any marks.

"Focusing in this way" means seeing that, although false imaginations do appear, they do not exist in the way they appear. As one comes to see that what appears as the two, subject and object, are mere cognitive constructs, (1) "one focuses on mere perception." Realizing that what we had imagined was an object (*artha*) is just a perception, we are left (2) "without focusing on an object." But once that initial object is gone, the realization that "*it* is a mere perception" would no longer refer to anything. And it would not be logical, Vasubandhu argues, to establish some perception as "*that* perception" without some specific object one is perceiving.[243] That leaves us with (3) "no focusing on [it as] a mere perception."

Let's rephrase this last step. In order to say "it is merely a perception," there needs to be something that "it" refers to. But once *it*'s initial referent is gone—that is, once the independent existence of some apparently external object has been rejected—then saying "*it* is merely a perception" no longer makes sense, since *it* no longer refers to anything. This progressive deconstruction—first of an object and then of the realization "it is merely a perception" that refutes the apparent existence of that object—is a corrective process, a skillful means for remedying our misunderstanding about objects. It is used to evoke that specific realization and is then quickly abandoned.

This progressive deconstruction propels the bodhisattvas directly toward nonconceptual wisdom. Vasubandhu explains (Dri 50) that although they are no longer focusing on the duality of grasper and grasped, these bodhisattvas do indeed have a focus: (4) They engage in a focus wherein "the two are not distinguished" since they no longer appear *as two* (*gnyis su*). Not seeing the two as separate entities in this way "is itself" (*de nyid*) seeing their non-difference, because one needs two entities to discern a difference. It is this non-focusing on the two, grasper and grasped, he continues, that is finally called *nonconceptual wisdom*. Bodhisattvas who wish to enter this nonconceptuality direct their minds accordingly.

243. This phrase is more literally: "it would not be logical to establish a *vijñapti* as *that vijñapti* without some object (*artha*) to be *vijñaptized*."

However, Vasubandhu is quick to caution, this does not mean that there are *no* cognitive processes occurring whatsoever. As we have seen, nonconceptual wisdom should not be misunderstood as the simple lack of conceptuality in extreme intoxication, unconsciousness, or inert objects. Rather, the reason nonconceptual wisdom is said to lack an object, Vasubandhu explains, is to exclude the idea that it has objects the way eyes do. So even though nonconceptual wisdom has no fixed focus, it can still be said to have some kind of object, but it does "not focus on any marks" or characteristics or visible forms. This is a state or process that lacks any sense of separate subjects or objects, yet it is said to be fully aware of all phenomena as if they were "equal to the center of space."[244] This attainment marks, for all intents and purposes, the end of the path, the final realization of buddhahood.

Maitreya now briefly correlates the practices that bodhisattvas train in—the five paths mentioned above—with the ten bodhisattva stages culminating in buddhahood. Referring to the phases of discernment, contact, and recollection (see page 287), Vasubandhu notes (Dri 52) that although discernment alone takes us to the paths of accumulation and preparation, it is only during the following phase of contact on the path of seeing that we enter the first bodhisattva stage (*bhūmi*). This is accomplished through nonconceptual wisdom by which one directly discerns the domain of reality (*dharmadhātu*). The next six bodhisattva stages (2–7), where one repeatedly practices recollection on the path of cultivation, are considered impure, however, because one's cognitive processes are still functioning in terms of distinct marks or characteristics. By contrast, the last three bodhisattva stages (8–10) are pure, because one no longer operates in those terms, since the remedy for that, practicing the path, now operates automatically.

One finally reaches the stage of buddhahood (*buddhabhūmi*), where:

> By practicing to perfection
> [we enter] the uninterrupted and effortless
> buddha activity;
> therefore this is the phase of arriving at its very nature.

By having "arrived at its very nature"—the nature of *dharmatā*—we have transformed our ordinary awareness into pristine wisdom, which is now of

244. See Brunnhölzl 2012, 132–47.

the "same taste" (*ro gcig*) as—is inseparable from—the wisdom of fundamental transformation (Dri 53).

Fruition: Bringing It All Back Home

Let's contextualize the transformative processes outlined in Maitreya's evocative text. Recall that the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* outlined how our cognitive unconscious (*ālayavijñāna*) is informed and structured by "our tendencies toward proliferating everyday expressions of characteristics, names, and preconceptions." In the dependent arising of subject and object, of mind and world—in short, of everyday experience—these constructive schemas help shape perceptions that constitute our lives, though we are ordinarily oblivious to most of this. We deeply and mostly implicitly *identify* with this collection of character traits, habitual unconscious projections and everyday prejudices, in a process called *afflicted mind*. It is associated with our affective and cognitive obscurations, which bind and blind us to our individual and collective illusions, the falsely *imagined*, from which nonconceptual wisdom promises liberation.

Liberation is depicted as a process of gradually developing insight into the *dependent* nature of phenomena by apprehending the constructed nature of our perceptions and then turning that insight toward the constructed nature of our self-identifications. Maitreya presents this progression three times: first demonstrating the *logical* interdependence of object and subject (which we saw in early Buddhism as well), then in terms of the *psychological* changes leading toward nondual wisdom, and finally in the contemplative practices *developing* nonconceptual wisdom itself, during which the two—grasper and grasped—are no longer distinguished.

This results in nonconceptual wisdom, a mode of awareness in which practitioners no longer apprehend any specific objects or characteristics whatsoever. At this point—"abiding in ultimate nature"—the usual phenomena of everyday consciousness no longer appear. This nondual state is characterized as "inconceivable, indemonstrable, and groundless, without appearance, awareness, or abode." Upon emerging from this, phenomena reappear "equal to the center of space . . . like illusions, and so on."

These transformations parallel the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras' classic formulation: a dharma is not a dharma, therefore it is a "dharma." Our

initial, naïve view of reality is deconstructed or "emptied out" in the process of nonconceptual wisdom. With the "wisdom that one attains after that" realization—which simultaneously knows both the thusness and the specific characteristic of all phenomena—bodhisattvas return to the world, fully recognizing, and thus more skillfully utilizing, the constructed, conventional nature of all images, symbols, and verbal formulations, particularly those expressed in the Mahāyāna sūtras. Those bodhisattvas are therefore able to "purify buddhafields, mature sentient beings, and bestow the knowledge of all things." This, in short, is the process laid out in this short text and, in effect, over the course of this long book.

Let's step back from this technical vocabulary and consider this process more experientially. Before practicing, we tend to be preoccupied with our everyday discomforts and disturbances, imagining that if we only had the right possessions or personality traits, then all would be well. We fail to recognize how profoundly constructed—and hence impermanent—our perceptions and conceptions are. We tend to react to our experiences with attachment and aversion, our emotional obscurations accompanying our cognitive ones.

Insight can be achieved, however, by carefully attending to the phenomena themselves, watching their seemingly independent status fade into the recognizable patterns that constitute our character traits and personalities, realizing how all these inform the worlds we inhabit. As these patterns repeat themselves, it becomes increasingly obvious that we and our world—our selves and objects—are inseparably intertwined. As we go more deeply, the very contents and structures of our unconscious projections—our "tendencies toward proliferating everyday expressions about characteristics, names, and preconceptions"—begin to reveal themselves as underlying constructs shaping our experience. This includes the complex processes feeding and sustaining our enduring, afflicted sense of selfhood.[245]

These insights often first occur at the personal level, as accumulated layers of personal experience and education are gradually peeled away, revealing still deeper strata of our acculturation, socialization, and historical conditioning—the shared worlds comprising the shared aspects of our cog-

245. This is the deep, even neurological, construction of subjectivity that Metzinger and Damasio deconstruct in their groundbreaking work.

nitive unconscious. Insofar as such constructs are attempts to offset the transient, dissatisfactory nature of saṃsāric life, they are ultimately products of fear and desire. This is also the site of intergenerational trauma experienced by many groups—such as those who have experienced war or systematic marginalization.[246] Excavating these oozing sores (the literal meaning of "outflows," *āśrava*) at the core of our being is never easy and seldom pleasant. It is, however, essential, the tradition says, to see through and release our deepest fears, desires, and identifications to fully realize the fundamental clarity of pure awareness beyond such artificial bounds and categories.

With determination, energy, and courage, one may plunge even more deeply into the species-specific experience of our sheer human embodiment—our bodies, organs, and faculties together with the perceptual and conceptual worlds they help configure. Eventually, even these subtle constructs drop away until, as Maitreya describes it, they cease to appear when one "fully abides in the nondual and inexpressible ultimate nature"—what the Japanese Zen master Dōgen describes as "the dropping away of body/mind" (*shinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落).

Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature does not elaborate on this—that is left for other texts and other writers[247]—but it does note that when phenomena reappear, they "appear equal to the center of space." It is from this groundless nonabiding that advanced bodhisattvas, now freed of their cognitive and affective obscurations, can begin skillfully using multiple conventional modes of discourse—the magic show—without being blinded by them, "attaining mastery over teaching" to "mature sentient beings" and "enter the uninterrupted and effortless buddha activity." We could think of this, by analogy, as like returning to one's home culture after a long time away, during which the implicit assumptions informing and governing one's former life have been revealed, examined, and recognized as relative and contingent, useful perhaps but certainly not ultimate. These same assumptions, though, are still taken for granted by those who never left, through whose beclouded terms bodhisattvas are

246. See Vesely-Flad 2022. I thank Robin Wells for bringing this book to my attention.

247. See Brunnhölzl 2012, 132–53, for a summary of nonconceptual wisdom as articulated in the DDV and the MSg. See Kramer 2017, Spackman 2021, and Tzohar 2021 for further textual sources and philosophical analyses.

committed to communicate—but with an acute awareness of their contingent, constructed nature, in which all cultural forms and psychological formulations "appear like illusions and so on."

These transformations are expressed in other Yogācāra texts, such as the *Buddha Levels Sūtra* (*Buddhabhūmisūtra*, Keenan, 2006, 2014), in which our distinctive modes of awareness are transformed into the five "buddha wisdoms." Briefly, the fundamental transformation (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*) is realized through the *pure wisdom* of the dharma realm, free from all conceptualizations and adventitious obscurations. *Ālayavijñāna*, as our basic underlying awareness, is transformed into the *mirror wisdom*, because it accurately reflects all "knowable content" free from subject-object duality (Keenan 2006, 82). Afflicted mind (*kliṣṭamanas*), representing our deepest layer of self-grasping, is transformed into *equality wisdom*, which is "free of discrimination regarding self and others and has realized the universal equality" of all sentient beings (82, 85). Our mental awareness (*manovijñāna*), shaped by the concepts and characteristics that differentiate phenomena, is transformed into *discernment wisdom*, which discerns "all marks without obstacle," providing "deep, unhindered insight into the differentiations of all knowables" (80). Finally, the five forms of sense awareness that respond to sensory stimuli are transformed into *duty-fulfillment wisdom*, which manifests the "immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable buddha transformations in all world realms," and "brings to completion external tasks," (83, 86) such as discerning the 84,000 delusions that plague sentient beings and teaching all their respective antidotes.

These five wisdoms were eventually worked into the ritual expressions of tantric Buddhism and portrayed in the roughly contemporaneous tantric text, the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, as the Five Buddha Families. Their images are found to this day—in maṇḍalas, street-side stūpas, and even door lintels—throughout Himalayan and Tibetan cultural areas (Lauf 1976).

9

Conclusion

The Dependent Arising of Yogācāra Buddhism

The core teaching for the first thousand years of Buddhism in India is arguably that of dependent arising. Though often underappreciated, as if superseded by later ideas such as emptiness, dependent arising is the central thread connecting early Indian Buddhism with early Mahāyāna, within which Yogācāra arose. As we have seen, dependent arising is both famously equated with emptiness in Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (24.18) and placed front and center as the dependent nature in Yogācāra's three-nature theory.

Most of us, however, do not ordinarily see things as interdependent. We think and act as if there actually were wholly separate and independent objects and subjects, failing to notice the multiple ways that such reified notions cannot adequately account for the dynamic dimensions of experience: perceptions and conceptions change, different people see things differently, different species have different faculties and inhabit different species-specific worlds. Most cognitive scientists agree with the basic Buddhist view that what we experience as "objects" are deeply constructed. Based on their findings alone, naïve realism is no longer tenable. As Indian Buddhists realized centuries ago: all perceptions are mere marks (all *saṃjñā* are *nimitta*).

Nor can we take the notion that we are singular subjects at face value. We are constantly changing and maturing over time—through experience, education, and insight—and are ourselves comprised of multiple interacting processes or systems (circulatory, respiratory, and so on). The brain alone is comprised of more than 86 billion neurons, whose connecting dendrites are more numerous by several orders of magnitude—"as numerous as the sands

of the Ganges" as the classical texts put it. Moreover, no reputable neuroscientist maintains that there is some central part of the brain, some master module or CPU of the self, where it is all "put together." Such notions belong to a bygone era, one dominated by models of centralized control and authority, like gods, kings, and patriarchs. This, too, is challenged by the radically dynamic and interactive model of "self" initiated by the Buddha some twenty-five hundred years ago.

Analyzing phenomena in terms of dependent arising involves examining "objects" and "selves" in terms of their interaction, for they are logically as well as psychologically interdependent; one makes no sense without the other. Analyzing experience in terms of dependent arising, therefore, involves discerning *patterns of interaction*—"objects" impinge upon the faculties, cognitive awareness arises, and the coming together of the three is *contact*. This is its basic mode of analysis and its basic unit of interaction. Most of the radical implications of the Buddhist worldview follow from this simple but profound approach: dependent arising involves interactive processes, not independent entities. "Objects" are correlative with "subjects," "worlds" are correlative with our faculties. And these worlds (*loka*) are themselves continuously reconstructed as these faculties develop or evolve. The forces driving such constructive processes, as we have seen, are actions (*karma*) blinded by ignorance (*avidyā*) and fueled by the afflictive emotions (*kleśa*). From its very inception, dependent arising represented a middle way between the dubious dichotomy of realism and idealism. In this respect, early Buddhism already advocated the interdependence of "self" and "object," the leitmotif of the later Yogācārin interpretation of emptiness.

This genealogical connection between early Buddhism, beginning in the fifth to fourth century BCE, and classical Yogācāra, arising in the second to fifth century CE, undermines the claim that Yogācāra teachings represent a radical departure from mainstream Buddhism. That interpretation is not sustainable by our reading of its key doctrines within their historical context. Yogācārins placed analyses in terms of dependent arising at the core of their three-nature theory: we suffer from *imagining* that subjects and objects actually possess their own independent natures or characteristics, but we can see how this false imagination occurs by closely examining the *dependent* arising of our cognitive processes, especially the constructive processes occurring at nonconscious levels.

The connection between early Buddhism and classical Yogācāra is also evident in this constructivist model of cognition, not just of objects but of "worlds" (*loka*). As the Buddha stated: "The world arises in this fathom-long body, with its senses and mind; such is the world, the arising, cessation, and path to cessation of the world" (AN 4.45). "World" here refers to our experience of things in relation with our faculties and not to some "reality" we imagine exists wholly independently of it. Otherwise, how could the world "cease" for those who are liberated but persist for those who are not?[248] We should be wary of superimposing our default realist assumptions about the world—reflecting the legacy of Cartesian dualism—onto our understanding of classical Indian Buddhism.

These perspectives became the basis of the model of mind centered on *ālayavijñāna* and its associated processes. Yogācārins took the same terms and mode of analyzing the dependent arising of our cognitive processes from the early teachings and used them to analyze the unconscious constructive processes underlying ordinary experience. It is this constructivist orientation that gives the concept of *ālayavijñāna* such critical purchase on our naïve realism. That is, we are fooled by the way the world appears to us, not just because such appearances are constructed, but because these constructive processes occur outside our conscious awareness. They are already fully operating before we consciously experience "objects" in our sense fields. We do not see these processes, we only see their products. Such innate ignorance, as it were, is much deeper, and much more difficult to recognize and overcome, than most of us appreciate.

One reason for this difficulty, a second critical insight of the *ālayavijñāna* model, is that these constructive processes are not only nonconscious, they are also widely shared. The "names, images, preconceptions, and so on" that inform and structure our cognitive processes at the nonconscious level constitute the nuts and bolts of our *cultural unconscious*—the implicit infrastructure of our aggregated social habits and cultural attitudes. Most of us are too deeply ensconced in our cultures and societies—with all their shared assumptions, prejudices, and categories—to even *see* that they are constructed. This requires a trenchant examination of our deepest

248. See Johansson 1979, 28, and page 54 above.

assumptions, which can be fostered by encountering other cultures, by meditation, prayer, fasting, sleep deprivation, or any of the numerous other means of cultivating altered states of consciousness that human beings have developed over the millennia.

Seen in this context, the concept of *mere perception* (*vijñaptimātra*) is not a claim about whether or not "external" objects "exist" but an integral part of the process of interrogating and critiquing how we normally experience the world—that is, in terms of our innate naïve realism. Recognizing that our experience of these apparently independent objects is inseparable from our interaction with them is a crucial step in recognizing how implicated, how embodied and engaged, all our perceptions are. Moreover, far from establishing the substantial existence of the subject, the insight that objects are mere perceptions is immediately followed in the texts we examined by a similar critique of ourselves as singular, independently existing subjects. In this way, the realization of *vijñaptimātra* is an essential step toward recognizing the dependent arising of all phenomena—which, we remember, is the flip side of emptiness. This opens the way to the realization of the ultimate nature, the empty nature, of all phenomena. Once that transformative role has been played, we realize that *vijñaptimātra* is also just another *vijñapti*, just a critical tool to use, not something to grasp onto or turn into a "view."

This is the basic theme of *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature*—that we can fundamentally transform our fears and desires and thereby free ourselves to act in accordance with the innate wisdom and compassion we already possess in abundance—an article of faith for Mahāyānists. This facilitates a fundamental transformation of our being, a direct realization of reality as it is brought about by a nonconceptual wisdom freed of subject-object duality and unmediated by the cognitive schemas built up over countless lifetimes. It is liberation from our common, collective illusions of independence and isolation, and entry into a reality resplendent with connection and compassion.

All this is epitomized in the quintessential Mahāyāna commitment to awakening for the sake of all beings (*bodhicitta*). Bodhisattvas return to the world with a toolbox full of conventional methods, not ultimately true propositions but useful, pragmatic devices, to help us all deconstruct our flawed collective worlds and thereby decrease the multiple causes of suffering—a

project as varied and endless as there are beings in the universe. This then raises the question: what do we do with all these tools, here and now?

Affirming the Conventional in Our Contemporary World

Humanity is in a crisis, quite a few in fact: global inequality, racial and ethnic conflict, the alarming rate of climate change, and a pervasive mistrust of the institutions that inform and organize our lives. On top of these multiple social, political, and spiritual crises, we are in a deep epistemological crisis, doubting our ability to distinguish valid knowledge from fantasy and false imagination.

We can make sense of much of this, though, from the Mahāyāna perspectives we have examined, especially the transformation epitomized in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras: a dharma is not a dharma, therefore it is a "dharma." Humanity has long been stuck in an untenable and ultimately incoherent view that the world is populated with independent entities, subjects and objects, possessing their own inherent characteristics. We have gradually come—belatedly and uncomfortably—to recognize how unworkable essentialism is on many levels and have at least conceptually deconstructed some of its most egregious manifestations. But it is easy to get stuck at this point, in thrall to the thrill of negation. This leaves us on the brink of nihilistic despair: if there are no absolutes, we fear, then there is no truth, meaning, or morals. As Dostoyevsky poignantly asked in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: If God is dead, is everything permitted? The Mahāyānists respond with a resounding "No!" In lieu of all these untenable absolutes, what we need are conventional remedies. It is possible, indeed imperative, Mahāyānists argue, to recognize conventional cause and effect in the conventional world in order to solve conventional problems using conventional tools that are appropriate and applicable to the problems at hand.[249]

This is not just an "academic" question. Essentialist notions are not only logically incoherent, but the environmental, social, and emotional turmoil that grasping onto essentialized identities instigates in our interconnected

249. See Garfield 1995, 200n67, and note 98 above on page 138.

world has become a continuing source of suffering and strife. Arguably, such thinking permeates the multiple crises we face. A century and a half after Darwin, many of us still see ourselves as a species set apart from all others, indeed set apart from the rest of the biological world. We are sojourners in a fallen, disenchanted world—or so our therapists report. We think we can interfere with ecological systems at every level without consequence—or so our industrial and agricultural practices suggest. We imagine we possess inherent racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural identities, hermetically set apart from one another—or so our social practices indicate. All this is simply unsustainable.

In response to these incoherencies and their deleterious consequences, modern disciplines, both the sciences and the humanities, have over the last century or so been engaged in a multi-pronged critique of essentialism. We see this in biology, in the shift from Aristotle's fixed species essences to Darwin's evolutionary biology (Mayr 1988). We see it in economics and ecology, where analyses of interconnected, dynamic networks replace static models of centralized command and control. We see it in psychology and neuroscience, where experts agree that there is no essential entity we could call a "self" nor any neurological locale for such a thing. Identities, they agree, are constructs from start to finish. And we see this in the social sciences, where one of the most liberating—and often unwelcome—insights has been the recognition that all social categories are also just constructs, forged to provide benefit and belonging to some, but imposed by threats or violence to others. Last, the trenchant analyses of historicism, applied to religion and its claims to absolute truth, have torn back the veil revealing it as yet another human construct—necessary perhaps, useful no doubt, but a construct nonetheless. The rose, we now realize, is not the rose we imagined it was.

But if we stop at the deconstruction of all the constructs that have given so many a sense of order and security (albeit often on the backs of those who have neither), if we merely deconstruct all the idealizations we have worked so hard to construct, we may be left in a nihilistic lurch, unsure what is real or true, or who or what to believe. We cannot just stop at the liberating insight that, a dharma is not a dharma, "a rose is *not* a rose," for then it would be tempting to conclude, *a là* Ivan Karamazov, that if something is constructed, this necessarily entails it is invalid or untrue.

The Mahāyānists have been down this long and winding road before and have much to say about the next step: the affirmation of conventional teachings. Nāgārjuna clearly saw that without conventional truth the ultimate truth cannot be taught, just as the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* recognized that a one-sided emphasis on the deconstructive power of emptiness can strip us of reliable tools to analyze and understand our complex world, stranded without the means of articulating and sharing such insights.

As Vasubandhu argued in the *Twenty Verses*, the lack of absolute, objective knowledge need not lead to the moral nihilism or skepticism that Dostoyevsky feared. Absolute objectivity in our post-quantum age may be (to quote Emily Dickenson) a "sham."[250] But from the Mahāyāna perspective, since reality is ultimately inexpressible, *all* we ever have are conventional categories—some better or worse, some more or less effective, than others, but *none* of them are ultimate categories. The challenge in our "post-everything" age, then, is to move through the ever-unfinished deconstructive moment and work to formulate whatever appropriate, rigorous tools and methods are necessary for the multiple tasks at hand. We need to be very intentional in the conventional roses we collectively construct.

First, we clearly need to keep exorcising the "ghost in the machine," the specter of unchanging essences that continues to haunt our intellectual lives (*à la* the imagined nature). While the various sciences and social sciences have been doing exactly this over the last century or so, on all accounts our innate propensities toward reification remain fully functioning (Bloom, Gazzaniga, and Metzinger). And they continue to rear their multiple heads, Hydra-like, whenever we let our guard down. This is not Buddhist dogmatism, it is conceptual criticism: as Nāgārjuna's analyses made clear, unchanging essences do not denote anything functional in a world of flux. We can leave such notions to those who have given up on the world of the living and proceed to better understand the *recurrent patterns of interaction* (the dependent nature) in the world we actually live in—such as have been devised, revised, and disseminated in our modern disciplines. Keeping in

250. "Finding is the first Act / The second, loss, / Third, Expedition for / The 'Golden Fleece' / Fourth, no Discovery— / Fifth, no Crew— / Finally, no Golden Fleece— / Jason—sham —too."

check our propensities to essentialize is a collective endeavor, indeed a collective imperative (Solnit 2016), a kind of universal peer-review.

Moreover, in our modern era, the traditional Mahāyāna idea of two truths—that while everything is ultimately empty of its own nature we still need conventional tools to alleviate the many kinds of afflictions plaguing us all—virtually calls out for *multiple* modes of conventional truth.[251] And this is what we see in our modern disciplines, in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Despite having nearly unanimously rejected notions of absolute truth or unchanging essences—once considered the very definition of truth—each discipline has nevertheless developed its own methods for producing knowledge, its own rigorous criteria for assessing its validity, verified by application and adjudicated by experts in their respective fields. These provide functional, pragmatic kinds of *conventional* knowledge, which remain ever open to critical revision and reformulation—all without making untenable, specious claims to absolute truth. As the great philosopher of science Karl Popper concluded, "You don't have to have finality to have knowledge."[252]

This may be a hard pill to swallow for the absolutists who abound in our world, but in another light—in a Mahāyāna light—it is their saving grace. As the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* anticipated, this affirmation of the conventional may help us more deeply appreciate the living truths of our inherited cultural and religious traditions, without accepting their untenable and exclusive claims to authority. As a global community, we need to find a way between the two extremes of assuming, on the one hand, that religious ideas and symbols are literally and timelessly true—despite being expressed in metaphorical language and prescientific worldviews—and on the other hand, the conviction that if these ancient doctrines are not *literally* true according to contemporary criteria, then they must be literally false, as if these two extremes—both wedded to the same narrow, univocal understanding of language, truth, and symbol—were the only possibilities.

251. Biologist Steven Rose (2003, 95) observes that there are multiple legitimate and useful ways to investigate our world. It may well be that "our world . . . is an ontological unity, but to understand it we need the epistemological diversity that the different levels of explanation offer."

252. Paraphrased in Wehner 2021. See Rauch 2021 and Crossan 1988.

To slightly oversimplify, the fundamentalists and scientific materialists are both stuck in the same literalist fallacy. This impasse is also unsustainable.

What would the Yogācārins, indeed most Buddhists, suggest? That we seek a middle way between these two extremes and employ the multitude of conventional truths we already have in abundance.[253] This requires recognizing the relative validity and utility of multiple disciplines, traditions, and cultures, each with their own standards, norms, and practices, couched in their own compelling modes of expression. We know better than to read a repair manual, a book of poetry, or a blurb on a cereal box with the same expectations or criteria of truth, beauty, or utility. We need to bring such basic intuitions to bear when reading religious texts as well.

Poetry, literature, and art all convey recurrent human truths, albeit expressed in constantly changing forms, that we seldom mistake for universally valid scientific formulas. Religious languages, too, convey the distilled wisdom and compassion of human experience through the centuries, yet are often couched in symbolic images and stories that require their own distinctive modes of interpretation, more like poetry and art than science or mathematics. And they continue to serve incalculable human needs ever undetectable by Sir Francis Bacon's calculus of mass in motion. It is both foolish and self-defeating for us to read these kinds of texts as if they were simply outdated scientific treatises and thereby sacrifice our vital inherited traditions at the altar of the jealous god of quantification.

We see a similar conceptual cul-de-sac in personal and group identity. The crucial and liberating insight that identities are constructed also threatens to undermine all the positive functions that personal and group identities provide in our complex, confusing world. A common response to the existential facts of impermanence and lack of essence is to try to forge a fixed locus of identity that, we imagine, provides coherence and security. Ironically, this generates further insecurity as we fail to recognize that all such identities are cobbled together—like the conjured images at the magic show—out of bits and pieces by the side of the road and are thus bound to fall apart sooner or later. Maintaining such precarious constructs requires constant care and attention—as well as aversion toward contradictory facts,

253. For a modern Chinese Yogācāra response to these challenges of modernity, see Aviv 2020.

feelings, and ideas. Accordingly, anxieties about "others" permeate the conscious and unconscious minds of both individuals and groups. Since we are all social, cultural, and linguistic beings, our underlying assumptions and anxieties are widely shared even when unacknowledged. In response, we reinforce the belief that our tradition, our culture, our religion, is the one "true" tradition, which must be protected against all others. Belief is "a beautiful armor, that makes for the heaviest sword," John Mayer sings, but "we're never gonna stop the war if belief is what we're fighting for." No one makes these critical points more clearly than the Buddhists: protecting constructed identities as if they were immutable realities is not only futile—it is a recipe for endless conflict. This too is unsustainable.

Yet the idea that we all ought to jettison our cultural and social bearings for some rootless cosmopolitanism has never been a viable option for most people. If cultural pluralism means that no culture has any truth or value *whatsoever*—if we stop at the stage of deconstruction—then most will reject that cultural pluralism and opt for a tragic return to their imagined communities—and to endless strife. Fundamentalism and ethnonationalism, we see, have the same midwife.

All this is avoidable. The *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* states that the taste of emptiness pervades all the Buddhist teachings, despite being formulated differently for different levels of receptivity and understanding. In this vein, we might say that our modern sciences also tell us—if we could hear them clearly—that our understanding is richer, more robust, and more functional when we recognize the dependent arising of phenomena and channel our acute awareness of each other's angst, along with our analytic abilities and empathetic impulses, toward the alleviation of all suffering. Most importantly, this also suggests that that same spiritual core underlies each of the coded messages of love and wisdom in our multiple traditions, if we have the nuanced ears to hear them, liberated from our self-imposed shackles of a dry literalness and narrow locus of self-concern. As my Biblicist colleague says, "The Garden of Eden is true, but it didn't happen."

In the Yogācāra formulation, this affirmation of the conventional validity of all traditions and cultures—shorn of their essentialism and exclusivity—is the ongoing expression of the "mundane wisdom acquired after that" nonconceptual apprehension of reality that is beyond all definitive formulation. The bodhisattvas, it is said, return to the world expressing

themselves through conventional means, using the plurality of our conventional discourses and shared constructs, to lead others to the perfect realization of that inexpressible, ever-present, resplendent reality underlying all phenomena—like the next Buddha, Maitreya the Loving One, sitting so patiently waiting for Asaṅga to let loose his last bonds of selfhood. As Maitreya and Vasubandhu emphasize, our entire social and cultural lives depend on such shared constructs—for we are always "mutually influencing each other" in the ongoing construction of our collective worlds, whether we are aware of it or not. And it is these lives, these traditions, these cultures, here and now, that we need to continually clarify, rectify, and revivify. Our challenge, then, is not to lament the loss of some imagined objectivity we never had—which in our post-quantum world is past plausibility—but to intentionally and compassionately construct the worlds we need for the benefit of all beings. How we do this is an open-ended invitation: the Buddha was said to have taught 84,000 teachings to ameliorate the 84,000 kinds of afflictions from which we suffer.

Glossary

Abhidharma. Based on one of Buddhism's Three Baskets (*tripiṭaka*) of scripture, this major scholastic tradition sought to systematize the Buddha's teachings, especially in terms of the concept of *dharmas*. It was most active in South Asia from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE and is considered definitive by most Theravādin Buddhists to this day.

afflicted mind (*kliṣṭamanas*). This distinctively Yogācāra concept refers to a level of unconscious self-grasping and self-love directed toward *ālayavijñāna*.

afflictions (*kleśa*). The motivations and attitudes that afflict or defile our minds, making the actions associated with them karmically unwholesome.

aggregates (*skandha*). This refers to the five "bundles" or groups of processes that comprise a living being: material form, sensation or feeling, apperception or recognition, karmic formations (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness.

ālayavijñāna. Storehouse consciousness. This is a stream of dependently arisen unconscious cognitive processes where the karmic seeds (*bīja*) and imprints (*vāsanā*) built up from previous actions and experiences are "stored." It comprises multiple subliminal processes—informed by cognitive schemas, names, and concepts—that shape and form conscious experience.

apperception. See *saṃjñā*.

appropriation. See *upādāna*.

artha. Object, aim, meaning, referent. In a cognitive context, *artha* refers to the object of cognition, which we experience as a part of our interdependent processes.

Asaṅga (fourth–fifth century CE). Author and redactor of many classical Yogācāra texts.

āśrayaparāvṛtti. *See* fundamental transformation.

awareness. *See* consciousness, cognitive awareness.

bhājanaloka. *See* shared world.

bīja. *See* seed.

cetanā. *See* intention.

characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*; *nimitta*). The mark or quality that distinguishes one thing from another. See also *nimitta*.

citta. *See* thought, heart/mind.

cittasantāna. *See* mindstream.

clinging. See *upādāna*.

cognitive awareness. *See* consciousness, cognitive awareness.

concept, conceptualization (*vikalpa*). Closely tied to language, *vikalpa* refers to that which has been conceived or imagined and to the process of conceiving and categorizing.

conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*). This refers to runaway ruminations about past, present, and future events—what we should have, could have, or would have done and so on.

consciousness, cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*). This refers both to the stream of consciousness that persists from one lifetime to the next and to the six forms of sensory and mental awareness that arise from moment to moment in relation to cognitive objects. These two functions were not clearly distinguished in early Buddhist texts but were roughly divided in Yogācāra texts into *ālayavijñāna* and manifest awareness, respectively. *See also* mentation, thought; thought, heart/mind.

contact (*sparśa*). Classically defined as the coming together of object, faculty, and awareness. In formulas based on dependent arising, these three constitute a single cognitive event.

conventional expressions (*vyavahāra*). This refers to everyday ways of talking and thinking.

conventional truth. *See* two truths.

dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The central concept of causality in Buddhism: the idea that phenomena come about and persist dependent upon other phenomena. *See also* dependent nature.

dependent designation (*prajñapti*). The idea that all names and concepts are provisional, not ultimate, and depend on the mind designating them (*de-sign-ation*: applying "signs").

dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*). The second of the three natures (*tri-svabhāva*) in classical Yogācāra. It is word for word the same as dependent arising: "When this is, that arises; because this arises, that arises" (BTG 6.5). *See also* three natures.

Dharma. This term has multiple meanings. When capitalized, it refers to the underlying moral order of the universe and, by extension, to the teachings and practices that accord with or lead beings toward being in accord with this order—that is, religion. As an Abhidharma term, *dharmas* are considered the irreducible components of experience, considered to have both self-existence

(*svabhāva*) and distinctive characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa*). Mahāyānists argue dharmas are empty (*śūnya*) of these. As a general term, *dharma* also means phenomena.

dharmatā. *See* ultimate nature of reality.

distinctive characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*). The idea that phenomena have their own intrinsic characteristics. This is held by most Abhidharma schools but rejected by Mahāyānists.

emptiness (*śūnyatā*). One of the central concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism: all phenomena, including our selves, are said to lack—be empty of—ultimately real existence or essential characteristics. This does not deny their conventional existence and characteristics. *See also* two truths.

essence, own-being (*svabhāva*). The idea that phenomena (*dharma*) are self-existent and not dependent on other phenomena. Versions of this are maintained by most Abhidharma schools but are rejected by Mahāyāna Buddhists.

form. See *rūpa*.

fundamental transformation (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*). The transformation from ordinary discriminating awareness (*vijñāna*) to pure wisdom (*jñāna*) that fundamentally transfigures our mode of being. It effectively constitutes awakening in classical Yogācāra.

grāhaka. *See* grasper, apprehender.

grāhya. *See* grasped, apprehended.

grasped, apprehended (*grāhya*). The cognitive *object* insofar as it is being apprehended by an apparently independent subject.

grasper, apprehender (*grāhaka*). The *subject* insofar as it is cognizing an apparently independent object. Subject-object duality is our basic cognitive fault in classical Yogācāra.

imagined nature (*parikalpitasvabhāva*). The first of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*). "What is nominally and conventionally posited as the essence or the distinctive characteristic of phenomena" (BTG 6.4). *See also* concept, conceptualization; three natures.

impressions. See *vāsanā*.

imprints. See *vāsanā*.

intention (*cetanā*). This effectively constitutes karma insofar as it is intentional actions of body, speech, and mind that plant the seeds for results to later come to fruition.

karmic formations. See *saṃskāra*.

kleśa. *See* afflictions.

kliṣṭamanas. *See* afflicted mind.

lakṣaṇa. *See* characteristic.

loka. *See* world.

Madhyamaka. Middle Way school, one of two major Mahāyāna schools of Indian Buddhism. Its key concepts are emptiness, dependent designation, and a reworking of the two truths.

Mahāyāna. The forms of Buddhism that began developing in India around the turn of the Common Era and became predominant in East and Central Asia. It gave rise to new sūtras claiming to be the words of the Buddha, developed new conceptions of the Buddha and of multiple buddhas, advocated new notions of an ideal practitioner (*bodhisattva*) motivated by new aspirations (*bodhicitta*), and promoted new philosophical concepts, such as emptiness (*śūnyatā*), mere perception (*vijñaptimātra*), and buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). *See also* Madhyamaka; Yogācāra.

manas. *See* mentation, thought.

manifest awareness (*pravṛttivijñāna*). The six forms of sensory and mental awareness in traditional Buddhism that arise from moment to moment in relation to their respective cognitive objects. They are distinguished in Yogācāra from the subliminal *ālayavijñāna*. *See also* consciousness, cognitive awareness.

mark. See *nimitta*.

mentation, thought (*manas*). This refers to the process of thinking, to the mental faculty whose objects are ideas or concepts, or in some contexts to the previous moment of mind. *See also* consciousness, cognitive awareness; thought, heart/mind.

mere perception (*vijñaptimātra*). The idea that the objects we perceive are not separable from our engagement with them or, more precisely, that we only know them *insofar as they are* perceptual objects. This is distinguished from *cittamātra*, "mind only," which is often understood ontologically, in the sense that only mind "truly exists." Neither the term *cittamātra* nor its ontological sense appear in the texts we are examining.

mindstream (*cittasantāna*). The continuity of an individual's awareness (*citta*) within and across multiple lifetimes. It refers, in effect, to the individual caught in saṃsāra.

Nāgārjuna (second century CE). The author of *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and other influential texts, who became the founding thinker of the Madhyamaka school.

nimitta. Mark, sign, or characteristic. The sign or mark that characterizes an object; and, in some contexts, what causes it to become a cognitive object. *See also* characteristic.

nirvikalpajñāna. *See* nonconceptual wisdom.

nonconceptual wisdom (*nirvikalpajñāna*). This refers to a nondual mode of cognition, a direct perception of reality "as it is" beyond the duality between subject and object.

own-being. *See* essence, own-being.

Pāli. The Indian language in which many of the earliest Buddhist texts were written down and preserved—hence, the Pāli canon. It became a refined literary language for the Theravāda school of Buddhism.

paratantrasvabhāva. *See* dependent nature.

parikalpitasvabhāva. *See* imagined nature.

pariniṣpannasvabhāva. *See* real nature.

perception (*vijñapti*). What we perceive *insofar* as it is a perception. Made from a causative form of the verb "to know" (*jñā*), it literally means "to make known or inform." It has often been translated as "representation" insofar as it stands for something other than itself.

Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras. A set of Mahāyāna sūtras that extol the ideal of a bodhisattva, the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the practice of the six perfections (*pāramitā*).

prajñapti. *See* dependent designation.

prapañca. *See* conceptual proliferation.

pratītyasamutpāda. *See* dependent arising.

pravṛttivijñāna. *See* manifest awareness.

real nature (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*). The third of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*). "The unsurpassable complete and perfect awakening that is finally attained by bodhisattvas when they realize this [true reality]" (BTG 6.6). *See also* three natures; ultimate nature of reality.

rūpa. Form, bodily form, materiality. As the first of the five aggregates, it is often explained as the experience of resistance.

Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra. *Sūtra Explicating the Buddha's Implicit Intent*, the major early "Yogācāra" sūtra purporting to be the teachings of the Buddha but dated by scholars to the second or third century CE. It presents the overall framework and major concepts of classical Indian Yogācāra.

saṃjñā. Apperception or recognition; sign, idea. This refers to the process of "re-cognizing" a previously experienced cognitive object based on its distinctive mark or characteristic (*nimitta*). As an object of mental awareness, *saṃjñā* also denotes "ideas" or "notions."

saṃskāra. Karmic formations; complexes; cognitive schemas. This multivalent term refers to the formations that both enable and enact our bodily, verbal, and psychological activities. It refers both to the formative *actions* that give rise to cognitive structures and to the *formations* formed by such actions, as we see in habit formation; these nuances are nicely captured in the psychological term *complex*. Within the five aggregates, it refers to intention (*cetanā*), which effectively constitutes karmic action.

seed (*bīja*). A metaphor for the potentiality of the result of a previous action to come to fruition.

sensation, feeling (*vedanā*). One of the five aggregates; it is the initial reaction to something impinging on the sense faculties.

shared world (*bhājanaloka*). The surrounding world that is correlative with the faculties of multiple beings. It has often been translated as "receptacle world" or "environment." Shared worlds are like species-specific worlds.

sign. See *nimitta*.

skandha. *See* aggregates.

sparśa. *See* contact.

storehouse consciousness. See *ālayavijñāna*.

substratum. See *upādāna*.

suchness. *See* thusness, suchness.

śūnyatā. *See* emptiness.

sūtra. Texts that purport to record the discourses of the Buddha.

svabhāva. *See* essence, own-being.

svalakṣaṇa. *See* distinctive characteristic.

tathāgata. Thus Gone One, an epithet of the historical Buddha. When in lowercase, it refers to *a* buddha, one who has "gone to (or come from) thusness."

tathatā. *See* thusness, suchness.

thought, heart/mind (*citta*). *Citta* refers to both a thought and that which thinks the thought. In many contexts, it is a general term for "mind," especially as a momentary state or process. *See also* consciousness, cognitive awareness; mentation, thought.

three natures (*trisvabhāva*; *trisvalakṣaṇa*). This key Yogācāra theory reframes the problem of misknowledge or illusion: we falsely *imagine* that conventional phenomena have essences, this misunderstanding arises in *dependence* on our cognitive processes, insight into which allows us to see the *real* nature of reality. *See also* dependent nature; imagined nature; real nature.

thusness, suchness (*tathatā*). This term points to how things ultimately are: they are "thus." One of several terms for ultimate reality. *See also* ultimate nature of reality.

trisvabhāva. *See* three natures.

trisvalakṣaṇa. *See* three natures.

two truths (*satyadvaya*). These refer to what ultimately exists or is true (*paramārthasatya*) and to what conventionally exists or is true (*saṃvṛtisatya*). In Abhidharma, irreducible dharmas are said to ultimately exist, with ultimate characteristics, while composite entities—such as persons—only conventionally exist, with conventional characteristics. In Mahāyāna, all phenomena, even

dharmas, are ultimately empty of any inherent characteristic or existence but nevertheless conventionally exist with conventional characteristics.

ultimate nature of reality (*dharmatā*). The way things ultimately are, their "dharmaness." *See also* real nature; thusness, suchness

upādāna. Grasping, clinging, appropriation. This refers to basic processes, such as the five aggregates, that we identify with and "take as our own." The term *upādāna* also denotes the substratum or fuel by which a process is kept going.

vāsanā. Imprints. Often translated as "impressions," "traces," or "perfumations." This refers to the imprint or impression left from past actions or experiences that persists in the mindstream or *ālayavijñāna* and influences present experience.

Vasubandhu (fourth–fifth century CE). A major author of classical Abhidharma and Yogācāra texts, traditionally said to be the half-brother of Asaṅga.

vedanā. *See* sensation, feeling.

vijñāna. *See* consciousness, cognitive awareness.

vijñapti. *See* perception.

vijñaptimātra. *See* mere perception.

vikalpa. *See* concept, conceptualization.

vyavahāra. *See* conventional expressions.

world (*loka*). In traditional South Asian Buddhism, worlds are correlative with the cognitive faculties of sentient beings. *See also* shared world.

Yogācāra. One of two major schools in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its classical development occurred roughly between the second and fifth centuries CE. It systematized the three-body theory of a buddha and the bodhisattva path. Its signature concepts are the three-natures, *ālayavijñāna*, and mere perception (*vijñaptimātra*).

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themselves through conventional means, using the plurality of our conventional discourses and shared constructs, to lead others to the perfect realization of that inexpressible, ever-present, resplendent reality underlying all phenomena—like the next Buddha, Maitreya the Loving One, sitting so patiently waiting for Asaṅga to let loose his last bonds of selfhood. As Maitreya and Vasubandhu emphasize, our entire social and cultural lives depend on such shared constructs—for we are always "mutually influencing each other" in the ongoing construction of our collective worlds, whether we are aware of it or not. And it is these lives, these traditions, these cultures, here and now, that we need to continually clarify, rectify, and revivify. Our challenge, then, is not to lament the loss of some imagined objectivity we never had—which in our post-quantum world is past plausibility—but to intentionally and compassionately construct the worlds we need for the benefit of all beings. How we do this is an open-ended invitation: the Buddha was said to have taught 84,000 teachings to ameliorate the 84,000 kinds of afflictions from which we suffer.

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